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ANOTHER WAY OF LOVE

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ANOTHER WAY OF LOVE

BY
MARJORIE GRANT COOK

AUTHOR OF "LATCHKEY LADIES," ETC.



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CONTENTS

PART I—P'TIT ANGE

	PAGE
CHAPTER FIRST	9
CHAPTER SECOND	34
CHAPTER THIRD	62

PART II—LUCIE

CHAPTER FOURTH	85
CHAPTER FIFTH	105
CHAPTER SIXTH	132
CHAPTER SEVENTH	152
CHAPTER EIGHTH	175
CHAPTER NINTH	197

PART III—DÉSIRÉ

CHAPTER TENTH	231
CHAPTER ELEVENTH	247
CHAPTER TWELFTH	264
CHAPTER THIRTEENTH	274
CHAPTER FOURTEENTH	286

PART IV—ALMA

CHAPTER FIFTEENTH	299
CHAPTER SIXTEENTH	313
CHAPTER SEVENTEENTH	319

PART I
P'TIT ANGE

CHAPTER FIRST

(1)

THE tall coffin stood upright against the wall of the barn, exactly opposite the door. Alma was so used to the sight that it no longer made her shiver. Sometimes rays of dusty sunlight fell through the cracks and knotholes in the barn, picking out the clumsy but not unimaginative carving with which the coffin was adorned. Sometimes in winter it was powdered with fine drifting snow, but Alma never laid hands upon it except to brush off an adventurous hen roosting on the top, or to search angrily behind it for mislaid eggs.

Even Ephrem Lebel himself, who had fashioned it ten years before and had spent months in carving and decorating it as no Christian coffin had ever been decorated (according to his scandalised neighbours), displayed no further interest in it now, content to know that it was there, ready for him when he needed it. The existence of the coffin was a legend in the villages round about, but nearly everyone in Trois Pistoles had seen it at some time or other and active curiosity about it had faded. The venturesome children who tried to get a peep at it were speedily sent howling about their business with a smart box on the ear from Alma. Their elders agreed that it was a

gruesome thing to make and keep your own coffin, but after all, poor old Ephrem since the death of his three sons—they tapped their foreheads significantly.

The three Lebel boys had been drowned in circumstances so trivial and so terrible that their father and sisters could never bear to relate them. They were good boys, but “fond of fun like anyone else,” in the local phrase, which meant that they sometimes joined with other young men in having a spree on the crude smuggled white spirit, *whiskey blanc*, dear to the French-Canadian when he feels gay. Hercule was twenty-two and engaged to be married, Hyacinthe was twenty, and Narcisse a year younger than Alma, who was then seventeen. They went out on a fine Sunday afternoon, an almost breathlessly calm day, in an old schooner with a party of high-spirited youths holiday-making from Quebec, and were never seen again. They set off gaily, announcing that they were going to sail across the river to the north shore, a distance of thirty miles or so, and were laughed at by those on the wharf, who saw no wind to take them anywhere. They had on board concertinas and mouth organs and plenty of drink, were very hilarious as they drifted slowly out to sea, and remained in sight and sound for two or three hours. Sixteen youths were on the schooner (*Le Don de Dieu* it was called, after Champlain’s ship), Hercule being the eldest. They did not come back. When two days had passed and the local sailors and fishermen could hear nothing of the schooner, a government steamer from Quebec was sent out to search.

Not a trace, not a body was ever found, but it was beyond all doubt that some incredible accident had befallen the party. There had been no storm on shore, only a clouding over later in the day and a high wind, but there are treacherous winds and currents in midstream of the St. Lawrence River, and such disappearances were not unknown. More than one of the young men on the boat knew how to handle her in an emergency, but it was likely that they had been too "gay" to realise their peril until they were overwhelmed. It was improbable that any of them could swim.

As it happened the three Lebels were the only young men on board from *Trois Pistoles*, and the very isolation of their tragedy made it harder to bear when sympathy was offered to Ephrem and Alma. Ephrem Lebel had been a fine, upstanding man, but, after the catastrophe, he aged in a week. Though he had been a friendly and sociable man, he shut himself away from his fellows. He worked a little about the fields, but in autumn, when there was not much to do, he sat bowed within his house, scarcely to be diverted from his grief even by P'tit Ange, the adored youngest child, seven years old. He began to make his coffin, and carved every inch of it with crude symbols of his faith, spending himself on the work for months. Then he stood it upright in the barn, more like a great mediæval wooden chest than a coffin, and looked as if a weight were off his mind. He began to lose the look of crushing sorrow, and the pallor and misery of his face gave way to a more natural expression. He was ready to

exchange greetings and talk again in the village, but strange reports were flying about that he had lost his mind and was dangerous : he built coffins and put people into them ! his own daughters were terrified of him !

When he saw that he was not welcome among his old friends and observed their fearful looks, he kept to himself, and was seldom seen without one or other of his daughters.

(2)

These were Alma, seventeen years old at the time of the loss of her brothers, a dark-browed, capable, silent girl, and P'tit Ange, ten years younger, the baby of the family, who had been welcomed like a first-born when she came unexpectedly after a lapse of nine years. The boys had crowded into their mother's room, where she lay with the treasure beside her, and slightly altering the Christmas hymn, had solemnly lifted up their voices and sung, " Elle est née, la divine enfant." Alma seized upon the little sister as her own charge—which she became altogether two years later when their mother died and Alma assumed the responsibility of the position.

The child was christened with a variety of names beginning Marie-Joseph-Olympe, but as none of the family could bring themselves to call her by anything less endearing than " le petit ange," P'tit Ange she became. She was a pretty baby, spoilt as never child had been spoilt before, said the neighbours. Her brothers fought for the privilege of singing her to sleep with the im-

memorial lullaby of all the hens who were laying eggs in surprising places for P'tit Ange, who was going to sleep at once!

“ C'est la poulette grise
Qui pond dans l'église :
Elle va pondre un petit coco
Pour le P'tit Ange qui va faire dodo ! ”

Hyacinthe triumphantly declared that this verse first made her smile, and that she laughed aloud over

“ C'est la poulette brune
Qui pond dans la lune.”

Her father was always making her wooden toys, and patiently mending what she broke. To Alma she was the light of day. They all thought her miraculous. Alma bought her a little red pelisse when she was three. She cried and screamed and refused to wear it, but when the coat was changed for a pale blue one, she laughed and was as pleased as an angel. Doubtless she was under the special protection of the Blessed Virgin, having no mother, and must always wear her colours! Thereafter she was dressed in dainty blue and white. Her brothers declared that they would always work for her, that their P'tit Ange, beloved and beautiful, should be happy and free all her life—till such time as she married of course, when they would choose a fine rich husband for her!

After that fatal Sunday excursion P'tit Ange cried herself to sleep, for many nights, for Hyacinthe her favourite brother. Terror descended

on Alma lest she should lose this treasure too. She toiled under a burden almost too heavy to be borne. The bodies of her brothers were lost—what if their souls also were lost? She was terribly afraid, and she could see the same fear in her father's half-mad eyes as he sat carving his coffin and muttering prayers. She prayed with fervour and despair. At night P'tit Ange, fretting and ailing, kept her awake.

It was not a propitious time for Octave Ravary, who had admired her the summer before, when her cheeks had a fine red colour and her brown eyes sparkled with fun as her brothers and their friends laughed and sang about the doorstep at night, to come and ask her to marry him. He was humble enough, and she knew that he was a good young man, but it was not the time to approach her. She sent him away with severity.

“It will be years before I am free to think of myself,” she said. Young Ravary, scared and depressed to find that Alma no longer had red cheeks and bright eyes, and by the change in the air of the cottage since the death of his three friends, took his dismissal in good part.

When the coffin was finished and set up in the barn, P'tit Ange refused to go near it. If she could help it she would not even pass, much less enter the barn, which was across the road at the foot of the small rocky hill on which the house was built. She had a screaming fit at the thought. The fowls lived in the barn in the winter and their care fell entirely upon Alma. P'tit Ange shuddered and turned away if she saw her go in.

Alma began to work in the fields with her father, trying as best she could to take the place of her brothers and gradually shouldering a man's work, a matter for much adverse comment in a country where the women work as hard as a man but keep rigorously to the tasks that custom allots to women. Alma took no heed of custom. She learned to drive the plough, to sow the grain, to reap with a small hand sickle, and, later, to wield a scythe. Her strength was superb; and the village, half in disapprobation, half in grudging admiration, named her "the man-woman." She took little notice of the comments. Her day's work was whatever she could do. Year by year her father, broken by the loss of his sons rather than by age, depended more on her, and did less himself. At night she sat in the rocking-chair with P'tit Ange in her arms, on the gallery if it was summer, and over the kitchen fire if it was winter, and sang and rocked till the child drowsed off. She almost fell asleep herself, and could scarcely drag herself, yawning, to bed. Ephrem sat beside them smoking his pipe, and carving birds for P'tit Ange out of bits of wood, patient and gentle when she said petulantly that she was tired of his birds, but so forgetful that the next night he was making another. When P'tit Ange lay warm and sleepy in her tired arms, and their father sat tranquil and happy beside them, Alma forgot that her life was difficult and envied nobody.

She grew hard and angular and sunburnt from her toil in the fields. When the other girls of her age were being courted by the young men she had

no lovers. She looked weather-worn and older than her years and her independence was considered "frightening" in the village. Octave Ravary quickly affianced himself to another girl and had no successors in the demand for Alma's hand. When she was twenty-five all hope of marriage was considered over—she had "coiffé St Catherine" and was now an old maid.

She did all the work in the house too. When P'tit Ange was old enough to be of some use Alma was unwilling that she should spoil her pretty arms in the wash tub, or flush her delicate cheeks over the hot stove. But the younger girl was rather altogether selfish and insisted on doing a share of the work. She was allowed to mend for her father and sister as well as to make her own clothes. P'tit Ange was sweet-natured and gentle; even the neighbours admitted that spoiling had not harmed her too much.

She grew up very pretty, small and slender with eyes the colour of the Virgin's robe, and fair hair that waved charmingly round her eager little face. She knew that she was as lovely as an angel because she had been told so all her life; and she began to see it in the admiring glances of the young men at church. In an innocent and childish fashion she delighted in her own beauty. Shut in her room at night, it pleased her to hold up the candle and see the rather distorted little self the cheap and crooked looking-glass presented to her when she thrust her loveliness before it. Once she said to Alma, who came in and found her in front of the glass, "What a pity no one sees me

when I am prettiest," and was dismayed by her sister's fury of scolding and fury of tears. She burst into tears too, ashamed of her vanity, and flung herself into Alma's arms.

(3)

P'tit Ange was going to be married. She was only seventeen, but one should settle oneself early, or else one got left. . . . Cecile Dufresne had just been married at fifteen, and had gone away to live in the city. P'tit Ange was pleased with herself because Pierre Charette, who was well off and had a farm of his own with a fine house on it, wanted to marry her. She did not know him very well of course, but her father and Alma were satisfied, and many of the young girls in the village were running after Pierre. He was very handsome, she thought shyly, big and tall and strong, with curly black hair and black eyes that laughed. He came at night and sat in the kitchen talking to her father and Alma about the poor season it was, and looking across the table at P'tit Ange, who sat sewing demurely with her prim little air, learned in the convent, and now and then smiling at him with a soft expression not taught by the nuns.

It was Alma who had arranged the marriage the moment she saw that Pierre had definite intentions. He had spoken to her almost as if she had been the girl's mother. Alma liked and admired him, and thought that a son-in-law might be a great help to Ephrem, who was daily becoming less able for work and more mentally feeble. The thought of losing P'tit Ange from the house dis-

tressed Ephrem, but Alma pointed out the advantages of the match and put distress sternly from her own mind. The one great drawback to the marriage she did not speak of to her father ; Pierre had not disguised from her the fact that he was bitten with the idea of life in the States ; his brother was " making good money " in St. Louis, and Pierre might in a year or two sell his farm and join him. He was full of the chances life in the States offered to a young man, but his ideas might change after marriage. Alma hoped that P'tit Ange might settle his mind, and anchor him in Trois Pistoles.

Meantime P'tit Ange's trousseau, and her wedding too, must of course be finer than anyone else's in three parishes. Those Leblés had always been proud, and they certainly seemed prosperous people, ordering by post a white satin dress, a veil, and a wreath, all ready-made, straight from a city shop. The Widow Eusebius, who kept the post-office, was the authority for what these things cost. The house linen, too, was superior !

Pierre did his part by repainting the outside of his house bright blue, and buying a fine new " quat'roue " to drive the bride home in.

The wedding day dawned, a perfect summer day, and at five o'clock in the morning Alma dressed the bride in all her finery. She looked very sweet as she stood in the morning light, trembling a little beneath her veil as she waited for her father to bring round the covered buckboard in which she was to drive to the church. She scarcely spoke all the three miles, but sat with her hand slipped

into Alma's, and clung to her excitedly for a moment, with her face hidden, before she entered the church. Only her own family and Pierre's relations and a small number of friends were present at the ceremony. In a few minutes it was over, and Mme. Pierre Charette was being kissed and complimented and told how beautiful her dress was, and how dignified she must be now. Pierre proudly lifted her into his new carriage—with white satin streamers tied to the whip—and drove off at the head of a procession of quat'roues and calèches and buckboards, and the real ceremonies of the day began. Alma and Ephrem turned back the hood of their buckboard, took the place of honour next after the bridal couple, and drove to the house of P'tit Ange's godparents to breakfast. Moise Pradet described himself over the door of his shop as *Groceur en gros et en Détail*, and was a rich man. He and Mme. Pradet, a plump and jovial pair, were waiting at their gate attired in their best clothes to welcome the newly-married couple. After a short time spent in taking refreshment the Charettes drove off again at the head of the procession, which now included the quat'roue of M. and Mme. Pradet. They stopped at nearly every house in the village to accept congratulations and to drink—and sometimes eat—the bride's health, the train of carriages and guests continually growing.

So it went on all day, for the best part of two parishes had been asked to the wedding. By the time the long procession of vehicles was on its return journey the young men had had quite

enough beer and sweet wine and whiskey blanc to make them very hilarious, and the young girls and women were inclined to giggle and scream and indulge in rather rough flirtation.

The little bride was flushed and excited but scarcely conscious of fatigue when Pierre lifted her down at her father's door, kissing her soundly as he did so. Pierre had drunk with the best in acknowledgment of many speeches of felicitation at the different houses, but he was quite master of himself. P'tit Ange felt a wave of pride when she looked at him. He was certainly the handsomest man at his own wedding. Alma took off the wedding veil, bathed the bride's dusty face and hands, brushed out and pinned up again the golden hair, caressingly replacing the veil, now folded back for dancing, and the wreath of cotton orange-blossoms on the small head. She touched her almost awkwardly, as if P'tit Ange were no longer the little sister she had mothered all her life, but a creature exalted somehow by the ceremony of the morning, changed, and lifted away from her arms.

Pierre called up the stair with joyful impatience in his voice. P'tit Ange hastily shook herself away from Alma and ran to him. He took his wife on his arm, and they went down the path and across the road to the barn. It had been cleared, and the coffin hidden away for the wedding supper and dance. The guests, laughing and gay, streamed after them.

Alma was tired and stiff by long hours of driving in the hot sun, in her unaccustomed clothes—a

purple taffeta dress and a hat with feathers, also bought from the catalogue of a town shop—and sank for a moment into a chair beside the window, though she knew she ought to hurry down to the barn herself to see that everything was right. The wedding breakfast could not begin till she was there to take her place at the foot of the table with her father, but they must wait for her. She had maintained an air of pride and excitement all day, as befitted her position, for the match was a good one. She was satisfied that she had done her best for P'tit Ange, but underneath her appearance of unusual animation she had a dreadful feeling that they were celebrating a death and not a wedding. She told herself a hundred times that P'tit Ange was not really lost to her, but the silence of the cottage struck her now like a blow. She unpinned her heavy hat with a sigh, laid it aside, rested her head against the wall, and followed with eyes that filled with slow, aching tears the lively progress of the wedding party. The late afternoon sun fell on them, husbands and wives, young men and girls, mothers of families calling to their unruly youngsters, and P'tit Ange in white clinging to Pierre's arm, the centre of the picture. Alma felt solitary and old when she looked at Pierre and P'tit Ange. She turned her dimmed eyes away, and when she saw again, dismay seized her because her tears had fallen on her fine taffeta skirt and made a stain.

“Alma, Alma,” called her father in a plaintive, wondering voice. “Come down, Alma. They have all gone in to supper. Let us go. It is

not right for us to be late. Where are you, my girl ? ”

“ I am coming, father.”

She pinned on her fine hat quickly, shook out her dress, and rubbed a towel across her eyes remorselessly. Then she went down to find the old man wandering helplessly about the kitchen with his half-dazed air. He took her arm and they went slowly down the hill.

Ephrem needed her. She was everything to him now, she reflected with a glow of satisfaction. She was not really solitary—yet.

(4)

It was an extremely gay wedding. Such a good match did not occur often, where the families of both bride and groom were so well known and respected and rich. No one, indeed, knew how rich Ephrem Lebel was, but the fare provided for the supper was held to be magnificent. The gratified guests did full justice to it, and drank as if they had been parched all day. There was plenty of fun and laughter, plenty of speeches and songs and jokes that left nothing to be desired by the dullest wits in point of emphasis.

P'tit Ange, glowing like a rose and shining with a kind of delicate radiance, sat happily beside her handsome husband, tasting a little of everything, and turning her smiling, rather bewildered childish eyes upon the different speakers, who seemed to be saying things to her that provoked roars of laughter. Pierre's replies to these speeches were very amusing too, and made everybody shout applause.

How delightful it was—marriage! Gaiety and kindness and pretty clothes and a fête for all the neighbours, with beautiful things to eat and drink. No wonder all girls wished to get married if it meant such happiness and amusement. The unmarried women must envy her dreadfully, P'tit Ange thought, and even the married ones: not one of them had a husband like Pierre.

There was only one unfortunate incident, when someone proposed the health of the father and sister of the bride, and old Ephrem got up to reply in spite of Alma's anxious, detaining hand. He looked very dignified in his best black clothes, a man of more than common height although his shoulders were bent, with a fine, pale face and bright sunken dark eyes, and thickly curling white hair. He spoke collectedly enough for a few minutes, a rather moralising speech on the happiness of a good accord between husbands and wives and the place of religion in daily life. Then his gaze began to wander about the company with the helpless, wondering look that his daughters knew so well.

“My son Hercule is going to be married soon,” he announced confidently. “To a nice young girl at St. Pascal—a good girl. I forget her name—what is the name of the girl Hercule is going to marry, Alma? We'll ask all our friends to that wedding too. It will be very gay, I'll promise. Some of you fellows know Hercule, of course? I daresay you envy him his luck, eh?”

Overcome by this revelation to all the village of the state of her father's mind, and shocked by

the turn his fancies had taken, Alma pulled him down to his seat. It was years since he had spoken of his sons by name. He was generally just forgetful and puzzled. The girl Hercule was to have married was present too, a buxom matron long since consoled by her husband and children, but inclined on top of Ephrem's speech to become hysterical. Her husband took her to the doof of the barn, and then a diversion was created—as no one could eat any more, and therefore supper was over—by pushing the table to one side for the dancing.

The three fiddlers began to play a country dance : old Juste Pilote, the cobbler, leaned back against the wall with closed eyes while he played and stamped time with his feet ; young Juste Pilote, who had a mysterious reputation as a bone-setter and was much in demand for all sorts of afflictions, watched the dancers with keen interest and appreciation, often applauding them by name, and, Trancrède Bienvenu, the half-breed boat-builder, morosely fiddled away with his eyes fixed on the floor.

The fun grew fast and furious, voices and laughter rose, feet stamped on the boards and a fine dust flew up into the faces. P'tit Ange swung from one pair of arms to another, was half-delirious with excitement and pleasure.

Alma danced too, gravely and feeling too old for it ; although married women who might have been her mother were taking their turn, apparently without any such emotion. Flushed and noisy and as happy as young girls over their performance

in spite of their shrieks of protest when the men whirled them too swiftly round. There were, of course, only square dances—the Church did not permit “familiar” dances, even if the young people had known any. They began always with decorum and solemnity, but ended in a romp. Alma dropped out when the dancing became rough, and stood watching it, her eyes never long off P'tit Ange in her “grand” white satin wedding dress. For the first time almost since the loss of the boys, some feeling of youth and desire stirred in Alma's breast. It would be nice to be gay and admired, to feel young enough to dance and flirt. It would be nice perhaps to marry, to be cared for as Pierre cared for his bride; to have one's own house; children too. With her attention fixed suddenly on the bride and groom as if they bore no relation to her, she began to wonder about this mysterious companionship of marriage, and a sharp pang of envy shot through her that P'tit Ange should know an experience that she did not know. She longed to feel, to pierce the mysteries of life for herself. She turned abruptly to find her father, but he was smoking tranquilly outside the barn with a group of the older men, and talking of the chance of dry weather for the hay.

It seemed as if it must be very late indeed when Pierre silenced the fiddlers and sprang up on the table to offer his friends his thanks once more in his bride's name and his own.

“I thank you with all my heart, and I wish you all equal luck and happiness. Not that there is another P'tit Ange, but I see plenty of pretty

young girls who look as if they would be willing to be the brides of fine young men like you. Eh, Berthe? eh, Marie-Madeleine? To the next wedding!"

He flourished his glass and all rowdily drank a last health. P'tit Ange kissed her hands, felt Alma clasp her briefly, and then she found herself out in the starlight with her husband's arm round her. The light from the lamps and candles in the barn streamed across the field; the music had begun again, but the laughter and the stamping feet sounded faint when they reached the road.

She was going to her own home! It was very cool and sweet outside and very still after the uproar of the dance. A little breeze, carrying the smell of hay, blew from the fields. The moon was high and full. Leaning back a little tired against her husband's arm, she heard the low sound of the ebbing tide on the beach below the cliffs.

"Marriage is beautiful," she sighed happily, "but now I am sleepy."

The sight of Pierre's newly-painted house, all gaily lit up with a lamp in every window, made her forget how tired she was. When Pierre had lifted her across the threshold she ran eagerly in, looking at all the rooms with the delighted pride and wonder of a child over a dolls' house. As he went through the rooms Pierre put out the lamps and closed the windows. The only lamp remaining was the light burning in the bedroom.

P'tit Ange exclaimed with delight over the room. But the sight of the bed made her remember how very sleepy she was. She yawned widely, with

her arms above her head, then laughed and childishly held up her face to be kissed.

Pierre looked at her oddly, and snatched her up in his arms with a ferocity that frightened her, crushing her against his breast and kissing her over and over, till she cried to be let go. She had been afraid that he was drinking too much, and now she was sure of it, but she was helpless in his powerful hands. She began to cry, and he let her go. She slipped down by the wall in terror and hid under the bed. She heard him laugh.

"You're safe enough there till I want you," and he kicked off his boots. Then he put out the lamp, pushed back the heavy wooden bed, and lifted her up gently.

"Open your pretty eyes and say you love me," he said in a soft voice full of love, kissing her tenderly. Then as she continued to sob he shook her.

"*T'es folle,*" he whispered savagely. "*C'est le mariage.*"

(5)

Alma saw Ephrem into his room behind the kitchen, folded and put away his best clothes before she said good-night, and went up to bed herself. She laid away her own new garments carefully in the attic, where the three boys had slept, now a store-room for miscellaneous household gear, and then lay down between the sheets of the bed still disordered just as P'tit Ange had left it that morning.

The day had been full of fatigue but Alma, tired

as she was, could not sleep. The glory of the wedding was over, and the emptiness of the house appalled her as it had appalled her ten years before, when she knew that her brothers would never come home again. She had resolutely thought only of her little sister's future. Now her own faced her desolate enough. Perhaps she should have married Octave long ago : a woman was certainly better when she established herself. But there was no use thinking of that now, and Octave had not waited long. She did not really regret it. She put her hand on the pillow, where night after night she had touched P'tit Ange's head, silently adoring her, and felt bereft.

In the faint colourless dawn she rose and dressed, and went down to the kitchen, treading softly, although there was no fear of waking her father, who always slept heavily, and was likely to be late after the excitement of the day before. She went out, crossing the road into the fields, and wondering at the strangeness and chill of the morning. She was up early every day of her life, but never so early as this. The fields, grey with dew, lay beneath a low grey sky. A little wandering wind of dawn caught the salt smell of the low tide and carried it up to her. Not a bird's note stirred the silence. Alma seldom went near the beach, but now, moved by some obscure impulse, she made her way to the steep path that was cut down the side of the cliff. The woods were very cold and half dark. The dew-soaked ferns brushed against her face and hair as she pressed close to the cliff, holding now and then to a branch to

swing herself past a place where the path had broken away. Once the boys had kept the way to the beach in good order, with wooden steps down the most difficult places, but Ephrem had not troubled about it since, and when he and Alma required to go to the beach, they used a neighbour's path in preference to their own very dangerous one. But Alma was unconscious of the difficulties of the way. Her shoes, her hair and face were wet when she reached the shore and sat down on the cold sand. The tide was out a long way, but was running in rapidly over flat sand and sharp slate ridges, filling up the little bays and pools and making islands of the great boulders. The long curve of the beach, the high green cape cutting into the river, the faint outline of the opposite shore, mist-hidden, seemed suddenly to become unknown country. She looked about her as if in a dream, cold, waiting.

The tide flowed in steadily, flooding bay and inlet, covering the boulder islands and making a level line on the strip of sand beneath the cliffs. The grey east brightened, quickening to colour that thrilled along the horizon, filling sky and sea. It was a new world to her, often as she had seen the sun rise, a world of beauty and immense silence. She felt a responsive tremor that she associated only with religion, with one particular moment in the Mass when she scarcely dared breathe for the Holiness that filled the church. She found her eyes wet, as she found them on Sunday mornings, after that moment had passed.

She suddenly sprang to her feet, her face amazed

and tense, her eyes narrowing as she gazed towards a fishery that ran out between her and the point of land that was called Whirlpool Point. She began to run along the beach as if possessed. She presently heard herself calling, "Wait. Wait for me, P'tit Ange—I am coming," but her voice died in her throat, and her feet as she ran over the slate and sand seemed weighted.

Near the fishery the cliff receded some way, and a field of wheat lay between it and the beach. The field belonged to Pierre Charette, and his house stood above it on the cliff. When Alma had caught sight of a figure emerging from the wood path, she had stared unable to believe that it could be P'tit Ange. When she saw that it was P'tit Ange, she had waited to see Pierre follow. Perhaps they had a fancy to go out in the boat together, or to be on the beach in the freshness of the morning before there were any eyes to watch them? But Pierre did not follow the little figure that half crept, half ran through the wheat, making straight for the river. She ran and stopped, ran and stopped, and looked back as if fearful of being seen. The beach was mostly sharp slate ridges half buried in the sand, and she was in her bare feet. Alma saw her stop suddenly, draw one foot up into her hand with a crying face like a child, and bend as if in pain. But she was in the water, knee deep, wading slowly out by the seaweed-covered fishery wall, when Alma reached her, her blue eyes dazed, her face white and swollen with tears.

"What is it, my poor little child? What is

it?" Alma cried, demented with fear, pulling her by the arm. "You are safe with me—Alma is here. Come with me, P'tit Ange."

P'tit Ange clung to the fishery wall and began to whimper.

"Leave me alone—I am going to drown myself. I won't live."

Alma put her arms round her, dragged her away from the wall, and carried her up the beach and into the wheat field. She sank down into the grain almost breathless, but did not relax her hold on the girl, who burst into a wild fit of sobbing, and clung to her neck desperately, repeating in a moan, "I won't live."

"What are you doing? Where is Pierre?—is it some accident?" Alma gasped when she could get her breath, soothing P'tit Ange with her hands.

"I left him asleep. I do not love him, Alma. I will not stay with him. I will come back to you and my father," P'tit Ange said, weeping with less violence. "I ran away. I came to the beach to drown myself."

"God can do that for you, when He wants it to happen," Alma said, fear suddenly giving way in her mind to self-reproach and relief. "You remember our brothers? It is not only yourself you would have killed, if you had succeeded in such wickedness. But tell me, tell me——"

"Pierre was drunk after our wedding. Oh, Alma, I will not be married—I do not like to be married," wailed P'tit Ange in despair.

Alma sat upright pushing her sister from her

arms and looking fixedly at her, outraged. A scarlet wave of colour mounted to her face. She had failed in her duty to P'tit Ange; she had spoiled her: she had brought her up in too great seclusion, in ignorance of things that other girls took for granted, and now she thought marriage a disaster, and threatened to bring scandal on the family. P'tit Ange, talking rapidly, half incoherent, did not notice that sympathy was giving place to anger in her sister's face, till she was stopped with a violence that in all her life she had never experienced before. Alma lifted her rough sunburnt hand, moved by something deeper than her quick temper, and struck P'tit Ange on the cheek.

“Take that!” she cried passionately, her words choking her. “You are ungrateful, stupid, wicked. You will go back to Pierre at once and ask his forgiveness, and behave like a woman not a doll. Would you kill our father—would you give scandal to the whole parish? You are married, P'tit Ange, and marriage is eternal.”

P'tit Ange putting up her arm as if to ward off another blow, looked at her, scared into silence; and Alma continued with blazing eyes, a strange tumult of jealousy tearing at her beneath her anger.

“You who are so fortunate with a good young man like Pierre for a husband—a beautiful house, a fine wedding—all that could be done for your happiness—to say that you do not love your husband! How do you know that you do not love him? You do not yet know him, but you will do your duty all the same. A woman accustoms herself to marriage. Does anyone else talk as you

have talked? Did I send you to Mother Mary-Joseph at the convent to be taught the submission of a wife for nothing? Did you listen in the church yesterday to what the curé said? Then, attend to it. If Pierre tries to kill you, you will still stay with him. But he will not do that," she added in a milder tone, seeing P'tit Ange's terrified childish face. "Pierre is good; he loves you. What is a drink too much at your own wedding? You will not see him like that again in a year."

Compunction smote her as she saw P'tit Ange shrink. Yesterday the ceremony of marriage had seemed to exalt her into a half divine person removed from the things of ordinary life. To-day she was a child again. Nothing but a bewildered child.

Alma's tenderness returned. She put her arms round her.

"Listen to me," she said.

CHAPTER SECOND

(1)

TANCRÈDE BIENVENU, the boat builder, fiddled the last lingering guests at P'tit Ange's wedding away to their homes, and then when there was nobody left to dance in the barn, prepared to go home himself. He carefully put his fiddle into the red cloth bag in which he carried it about and stood up, stretching himself and yawning. Old Juste Pilote, the cobbler, and young Juste Pilote, his son, had already gone, having a long drive before them, but Tancrède lived in a wooden shanty on the beach just below the Lebel's farm and was in no hurry to go. He yawned and looked about him; at the tumbled festoons of coloured paper that had so gaily decorated the walls and beams till the men had pulled them down to twist them round the laughing girls; at the lamps beginning to smoke and smell, their tin reflectors dimmed; at the bunches and wreaths of fading wild-flowers, the piles of empty bottles, the wreckage of a fine feast on the table. Tancrède was a misanthrope, but he conceded that it had been a very grand wedding as such things went, and remembered the frequent refreshment of the evening with satisfaction.

It was too late to go to bed now, or rather it was too early in the morning to think of anything but

work, but the boat-builder saw no reason why he should not breakfast first. There was plenty of good food still on the table; there was even an unopened bottle of beer. He got himself a good meal, lit his pipe and walked thoughtfully through the fields and down to the beach where his little shack, covered with tar-paper and sacking to keep out the wind, was built well into the side of the cliff. It had been a well-conducted wedding, he ruminated, and everyone had been asked to drink sufficiently often. The Lebel's had been free with the food and had done things handsomely. Poor old Ephrem Lebel was madder than one had supposed; that was a cracked speech he made about his son's marriage. It must be ten years since his boys had been drowned, and he had been demented by the trouble—getting queerer year by year it seemed. Well, now that the little girl was married he had no one left but Alma, the man-woman as she was called, but a capable creature. She had kept a sharp eye on Ephrem all evening, and had not waited to see the last of her guests go, but had taken him home as soon as the bridal couple had left.

Tancredi, who had fiddled morosely with his eyes on the floor, had observed more than might have been believed. He considered that Alma had a reasonable face (unlike her little sister the bride, who was as silly looking as most women). He preferred her strong sunburnt features and black eyes and hair to any useless indoor softness and paleness. Ephrem was fortunate in a daughter who could look after him well, and feed him well too.

He knocked the ashes out of his pipe and put it in his pocket, glad to feel the beams of the sun already warm on his face. He must put away his fiddle on the shelf inside the house and get to work. His fine breakfast had made him feel strong and energetic. A man didn't need so much sleep when he ate so well. But his fiddle wasn't under his arm. He had left it in the barn. Forgotten it completely while he made his meal; that was what too much food and drink did to a man, made him forgetful. He slapped his chest and laughed at himself in high good humour. He must go up the cliff again and get his fiddle, and this time he would go by the shortest way, through Pierre Charette's field, and up the easy new path he had made lately with steps cut in the cliff, and then along by the road to the barn. Feeling self-indulgent he lit his pipe again and turned towards the field.

It was odd to hear voices at that hour in the morning; odder still to see people lying among the wheat—two women it seemed, not sleeping quietly like tramps, but talking and sobbing. Tancredi was curious. He had the silent footfall of his Indian forbears; he slipped rapidly along the path and came upon Alma clasping the bride of yesterday in her arms and speaking low and fiercely to her. Her back was turned to Tancredi, and P'tit Ange's face was hidden in her lap. He did not wait for discovery, but sped into the shadow of the woods and watched the sisters. Here was a nice morsel of gossip, whatever it might mean. So the bride was in tears already! Sooner than

usual, surely ! What was she doing with her sister, and where was her husband ? They were a strange family, the Leblés.

He watched till he saw them come up the wood path, the bride composed now, almost happy-looking, supported and half carried by her sister. Keeping out of sight he saw them from the road at the top of the cliff enter the blue-painted house that Pierre Charette had prepared for his marriage. In a moment Alma came out alone and hurried towards her own house.

Tancredi fetched his violin, and strolled past the Leblés' cottage, but seeing nothing to excite further interest, he went to his day's work, promising himself that he would have a tale to tell in Moise Pradet's shop that night that would claim attention.

Most of the male part of the village gathered every night to discuss the affairs of life in the general shop. *Moise Pradet, Groceur en Gros et en Détail* was very proud of his smart sign, and the fact that he had nothing whatever to do with business "en Gros" mattered to nobody. The wedding was naturally the chief subject of discussion the night after its celebration. The belles of the three parishes were dispassionately reviewed, their charms of person and the dowry of each, as well as their conduct at the dance, searchingly enquired into. Beneath the light of the oil-lamp that hung suspended from a rafter in the ceiling, there were very few of the reticences that are perhaps the tradition of a larger world. There among the crockery and homespun, the farm imple-

ments and fly-paper, the cheeses and cakes of maple-sugar, the mixed groceries—taking on a contributory flavour from the dense tobacco smoke—simplicity of speech held. Names and ages were explicitly mentioned, individual claims to consideration, of the girls likely to marry well, were specifically set forth. Presently Alma's name was spoken.

“That eldest girl of Ephrem's,” Lucky Boivin the blacksmith said, “she is still not bad-looking. In her youth I thought she would make a fine match, but all that chance is passed now.”

“She had the reddest cheeks in the village once,” said Octave Ravary, sentimentally.

“She has still a reasonable face,” Tancrède Bienvenu volunteered, although he seldom had anything so favourable to say of anyone. Rather fearing that this opinion might lead to the supposition that he seriously admired a woman, he hastened to add in a confidential tone, “but I'll tell you about all those Leblés. I am convinced that they are all a little cracked. It is not only Ephrem who was touched when the three boys were lost. What do you think I saw only this morning?”

He emptied his pipe against the counter and told the story impressively, flattered by the amazed exclamations, the staring eyes and open mouths. Tancrède, who was not popular, tasted the sweetness of success for once in his life. Sympathy began to be expressed for Pierre Charette, and Moise Pradet, who was P'tit Ange's godfather, was with difficulty restrained from going at once to call on Alma to demand an explanation.

He did not do so. Alma was not called the man-woman for nothing, and she commanded the respect of the village. But it was a strange story.

It became a stranger story in the mouths of the women. Gossip flew round the parishes, and the burden of it was that all the Lebels were a little mad. The girls did not show it so much, yet ——

Moise Pradet finally could not contain himself any longer, and went to call on Alma to confront her with the story. He was round and small and fat and perspired freely as he sought suitable words with which to probe the subject of P'tit Ange's presence in the wheat field on the beach, in her sister's arms, the morning after her marriage.

"She was not there at all," Alma declared calmly. "I was not there myself. Tançrède is not bad at a drink, you know that very well."

"But he saw you—he saw P'tit Ange—he heard her sobbing," Pradet stammered.

"What a history! It is beyond my patience," Alma said superbly. "Ask Pierre Charette—ask P'tit Ange what they think of it. You will make them laugh finely!"

The grocer retired, not at all liking the contempt in Alma's eyes, nor the hardness in her voice, and feebly aware that her cheeks were again, from anger, perhaps the reddest in the village.

But the gossip persisted. Tançrède repeated his story night after night, and it gained a certain roundness and ease with time. There was something odd about the affair, and suspicion is a weed that flourishes and is seldom uprooted. Ephrem Lebel was mad—no blame to him, poor man,

afflicted by God with heavy trouble ; and Alma was not like any other woman, so silent and independent, able to do a man's work in the fields and already growing strange-looking. P'tit Ange was a lovely little thing but she had been kept very much at home, and it was hardly likely that she had grown up untouched by the shadow that hung over her father and sister. It would show later. Pierre Charette might have cause to regret his marriage. The good wives wanted to know the rights and wrongs of that story of Tancredi's.

A touch of mystery gathered about the Lebel's cottage. It stood somewhat apart from the other houses at the end of the village, and though it had not seemed solitary when a troop of children played at the door, nor later when the boys had brought their friends, loneliness had fallen upon it since. There was the coffin too, ready in the barn for Ephrem ; the knowledge of that would make anyone feel uncanny. People eyed the house and the barn curiously as they passed, and when in the summer evenings P'tit Ange and her husband sat rocking on the gallery with Alma, while Ephrem whittled birds with his pocket knife from a bit of stick on the steps beside them, the passers-by loitered and stared at the simple group as if there was something peculiar about it.

Alma noticed it with the same indignation that she had felt when the children had stolen after her into the barn to peep at the coffin, but she made no sign. She could not very well fly down the hill and box their ears, but the sense of hurt protection

that filled her when she saw Ephrem pitied or mocked, extended itself to P'tit Ange.

And P'tit Ange no longer needed her.

(2)

She was happy now ; a proud and contented wife pleased with her house and her position among the matrons, in love with her husband. But the remembrance of her panic-stricken flight to the beach, and what had happened there, made a barrier between herself and her sister. Alma had saved her from the consequences of an action, the thought of which burnt her cheeks with shame, but in doing so she had lost her as certainly as if the waves had washed over her dead body, and she had held that, and not the living P'tit Ange. When the door of Pierre's house closed upon her for the second time, Alma was shut out.

Pierre, within a day or two of his wedding, took his wife up the Saguenay to shudder at the blackness of its fathomless waters, and to marvel awe-stricken at the desolate splendour of Eternity and Trinity. Then he took her to Quebec, to visit his relatives and enjoy some of the city gaiety. She returned to her house at Trois Pistoles wholly his, only too eager to forget her former childishness. She was deeply resentful that anyone should know of it. She did not mind Pierre knowing ; he had been remorseful and kind, and he might know everything about her. But she was never unreserved with Alma again.

The elder sister sought no confidence and betrayed nothing of the emptiness and loss that

had come to her on P'tit Ange's wedding day. She saw the little sister happy, and that was as she had wanted for her. She had a high regard for the estate of marriage after listening dutifully to the curé's sermons on the subject for many years—he lectured his people often and severely on the duties of husbands and wives, and of parents and children. It was right that Pierre should be everything to his wife. She felt the definite spiritual estrangement between herself and P'tit Ange, but it seemed to her natural enough. Only she expected it to pass, and it did not. She went about her work, toiling early and late in the fields. The neighbours discovered a new cause for wonder in that a man as rich as Lebel was reputed should be willing to let his daughter slave so hard, should not hire a man to help him. Possibly he was a miser; possibly Alma was too mean to pay out money for help. She spent very little on anything, they noticed. She was ignorant of their criticism, working too hard and sleeping too soundly to give much thought of any kind to her personal life; glad when P'tit Ange and Pierre came to spend the evening with her and Ephrem, and each time newly troubled because her sister kept her at arms' length and was strangely uncommunicative.

A year passed and there was no sign that P'tit Ange's needle would be required to make the layette that many village brides, in frank expectation of an event that was seldom long delayed, prepared with their trousseau. Generally within the year the cradle was filled, and when this did not happen the young wife became nervous and mortified by

her failure to conform to custom. Nature as a rule made up lavishly to her later for her momentary disappointment, but to crowd the experiences of love and marriage and birth well within a year was the ambition smiled on by tradition and the Church.

P'tit Ange showed no trace of chagrin or disappointment at not fulfilling the purpose of marriage as promptly as her friend Cecile Dufresne, who had become a mother two months before she was sixteen, and was at home on a visit with her bouncing infant, bursting with the glory of it. P'tit Ange wanted a baby some day, but she shrank from new experiences, and was secretly glad that nature had not hurried her like Cecile. She smiled when the village mothers commiserated with her, the new and reticent little smile with which she met all Alma's unquiet or loving looks. She was no longer perfectly contented, but she had grown up fully in the past year, and no one should know of her trouble that Pierre was drinking again. Not very much, but enough to make him restless and idle. He had begun to talk of selling his farm and joining his brother in St. Louis, a terrible prospect to P'tit Ange.

The summer was wet and cold ; the crops were poor, and the hay was spoilt on Charette's farm because he neglected to take it in when a good day offered and when his neighbours were all carting theirs. Pierre grumbled more than ever, and his brother's letters became more urgent for him to go to the States. He was inclined to make the venture.

Alma heard him talk with a sinking heart. She tried to dissuade him, advancing arguments that she felt to be useless, against the alluring prospects held out in his brother's letters.

"But the next season will be a good one. You will be sorry to leave your fine pretty house, Pierre? And we Canadians are homesick if we go away from Quebec. You and P'tit Ange would be so homesick, away there among the Americans who speak no French. Stay another year, Pierre."

"Now is as good a time to go as we are likely to find, seeing that still we have no family," Pierre said moodily, with a hint of reproach in his words that startled P'tit Ange, who was sitting beside her father on the gallery steps. "And Eugene is not homesick at all—he has become an American, and calls himself Carter now. Not when he returns home, of course, but for business in the States he says it is better."

"I wouldn't like that," P'tit Ange said.

"But you would like to come with your husband, and help him make a fortune?" Pierre said, and she answered submissively enough that she would.

Pierre let the subject drop for a little, and in September P'tit Ange knew that the reproach of having no family was to be removed, and—because his chance words had shocked her—she was glad. She said nothing about it for a time. Later she consulted one of the women who had pitied her earlier in the year—the mother of a brood—but felt unwilling yet to tell Alma. But either Pierre or Mme. Guay gossiped and the news reached Alma

in the village shop as she was making one of her rare purchases.

“ Well, Alma, you'll be very proud to be an aunt, won't you ? It is high time that Pierre and P'tit Ange decided to ' make a purchase.' Let us hope for a boy. That will be nice for poor Ephrem,” Mme. Pradet said comfortably, tying up her parcel.

Alma looked blank.

“ You won't pretend with an old friend that you do not know about the expectation,” Mme. Pradet said, slightly offended.

“ Naturally not,” Alma answered, feeling cruelly used by P'tit Ange, but trying to smile. “ But it is early days to talk about a boy. A child is always welcome.”

She hurried away, went straight to the blue house and found P'tit Ange, in a checked apron busy over her wash-tub in the outer kitchen. She stood looking at her for a moment.

“ So it seems that all the village knows of your child before you tell me,” she said.

“ Oh, no one knows,” P'tit Ange cried, startled.

“ No one !—when Mme. Pradet tells me in the shop ? ”

“ I never told her. I spoke to Mme. Guay, that was all. I—I wanted to know——”

“ Before you told me ? And I was like your mother ! ”

“ But you are not a mother. It was natural to ask a married woman——” P'tit Ange said, defensive but ashamed.

Alma stood looking at her without anger, and the

tears that forced their way to her eyes she let run down her cheeks, unconscious of them.

“It is not right,” she said.

“I am sorry. I did not mean it—I was going to tell you. Pierre himself only knows it since a week.” P’tit Ange burst into tears. “You are so hard on me, Alma.”

“Oh no, never that. Come, never mind. I am foolish,” Alma soothed her in her arms, unable to see her crying without blaming herself. “After all, it is the best news in the world!”

“Pierre is talking again of going to the States,” P’tit Ange wiped her eyes after a moment.

“But this good news will make him forget all that,” Alma said, happily sure in her own mind that this would be so, and feeling immense relief with the assurance.

P’tit Ange had no such certainty. The dread of departure and unknown conditions kept her awake at night, but she would not say so. Alma would fly out at her again perhaps, telling her that her duty was to be acquiescent in everything her husband wished and thought best for them both. She believed this herself, but she found it difficult. The idea of going away from the life that was familiar to her, of leaving her own people, of having no one but Pierre, much as she loved him, frightened her. She shut her lips obstinately, pride and that other inexplicable feeling that Alma inspired in her forbidding her to complain. In an impulse of tenderness she stroked the rough, hard, brown hand that caressed her.

"I have decided that my baby shall be called Lucie-Alma," she said shyly, smiling as if she were naming a new doll. "I hope she will look like Pierre, but I do not want a boy."

(3)

Unluckily things did not fall out as Alma confidently expected. Pierre suddenly received a very good offer for his house from a farmer in the next parish who was marrying a girl in Trois Pistoles and was inclined to settle there. He had heard Pierre boast of his brother in the States and of his own intention of going there, and he offered him a fair price, "cash down" for his farm, on condition of immediate possession. Pierre, very much excited, accepted the offer at once, without consulting his wife or anyone else in the matter; then went home and told P'tit Ange to pack up her things, and get ready to become an American!

She was stunned, and sat looking at him as if she could not take in the meaning of his words. He became impatient with her.

"Must you look as if you heard of this for the first time? We have talked enough about the States and selling the farm, goodness knows. You have a good right to be pleased at the money we are getting—cash down, too," Pierre grumbled. "We will soon be rich in the States. A very good thing for the child who is coming. He will be educated just as well as Eugene's boys, and perhaps be a lawyer like his eldest."

"Will I have to talk English? Will no one

understand what I say ?” P’tit Ange asked, looking frightened. “ I don’t want to be an American. I am a Canadian. I want to remain a Canadian.”

“ Oh, Eugene says there are plenty of Canadians where we are going,” Pierre promised. “ And first of all we will stay with him. His wife was Marie Bellechasse of St. Anaclet. You will speak nothing but French. Well, we have a month to pack up and go. Better tell Alma at once though. She will be very sorry, but we will come back for a visit before too long.”

“ Before too long,” Alma repeated blankly when Pierre made the promise to her later. “ But better still, Pierre, why not put off going until next summer ? Oh, sell the house of course, as things have gone so far with Joe Bernard, but come and live with us for the winter. We have room. And go away when P’tit Ange is strong again.”

She made the suggestion hopefully, but neither Pierre nor P’tit Ange considered it for a moment. They would be ready to go in a month, and Marie Bellechasse, who was the mother of six, would look after P’tit Ange. Perhaps indeed by next summer they would all be back for a visit—as soon as that, the three of them. Pierre reddened and laughed with pride, and patted his wife’s shoulder kindly. He was enormously excited and pleased with himself, and did not in the least mind leaving Trois Pistoles. He had no relations of his own living there now ; they were a wandering family. P’tit Ange smiled at him a little wanly, and echoed that it was best for them to go as soon as possible so that Pierre could get work for the

winter. Alma would not so much as hint at her longing that P'tit Ange should come home for the birth of her child. She would have felt obliged to question any such suggestion had it been made because of her inherent belief that husbands and wives should be inseparable. And she knew that it would be unwise for P'tit Ange to leave Pierre for so long, although she trusted him. He was not like Ulysse Brunet, who had allowed his wife to come back in similar circumstances to her mother, and had deserted her. But if it could have been right and desirable for such a thing to happen, Alma would have welcomed her little sister back and have been ready to wait on her hand and foot with a passionate joy. . . .

She closed her hard hands in her lap, and looked silently in front of her. A strange wave of bitterness began to rise in her heart and threaten to overwhelm her. It was like the emotion that had seized her on the wedding day; desire for experience, envy of those with the natural claims and ties of life; rebellion against her own solitude. Those two were so secure with each other, so contented; they could do without everyone else in the world. They were free to choose where they would live and work. But perhaps if Pierre was not so successful after all in St. Louis, and if P'tit Ange was not so happy among strangers as she expected, they might be glad enough to come back to their own country and their own people. She had a savage impulse to break their security, to hurt them both. But presently the silent rage that tore at her died down, and she sat, half be-

wildered by it, listening to her father suddenly propounding one of his mad fancies to Pierre.

"I must tell you what I think," Ephrem said confidentially, dropping his voice and looking fearfully down the road. "I am very sure that the two younger boys, Hyacinthe and Narcisse, went to the States to seek their fortune. It is the most likely place in the world, they were always so adventurous, and they loved new places. I expect you will come across them, and when you do I hope you will tell them that it would do no harm to write. I suppose they think that I am angry because they have stayed away so long, but I am not. Young men have their own ideas. But tell them to write a few words from time to time. I daresay they have made money. Narcisse was a clever boy. I am glad you are going to the States too, P'tit Ange. It will be nice for you all to be together." He nodded his head and looked very pleased. "Yes, you will have a great deal to say to each other after so long a time, ten years and more, but you must not forget that Alma and I will be waiting for letters."

Alma shivered, but P'tit Ange answered her father soothingly; she had not lost her coaxing ways with the old man.

"Of course you shall have letters, and you must write to me. And some day you will come to the States and stay with us, you and Alma."

"Oh, I am too old for that," Ephrem said. "I am very old indeed, and I could not think of a long journey. I shall be going up the hill to the cemetery before long. I have had my coffin ready

for years. I made it myself, and it is all carved very beautifully. On the cover is a crucifix, and at the sides the symbols of the Passion, and at the foot my guardian angel, and holy letters. It took a long time. It is large too. You know the boys were drowned, and I thought if their bodies were found I would have a large enough coffin ready for all of us. Alma too, if she likes. Alma will show you my coffin. It is in the barn. It is not blessed yet, because if it were blessed, naturally it would have to be in the house, as one does not keep holy objects in a barn, and we had too little room. But Alma will see that it is blessed by M. le Curé in good time, and it can be brought into the house when I need it."

P'tit Ange gave a loud hysterical scream and threw herself sobbing against her husband. Alma roused herself and led Ephrem into the house, reminding him that he was making her a broom that she wanted finished, and setting him to work at it in the kitchen. Ephrem never had spoken like that before and she felt disquieted, but he seemed much as usual, and was easily diverted from the thought of his coffin.

The mere mention of the coffin had always terrified P'tit Ange and now she insisted on hurrying home with Pierre. Alma walked with them down the hill, and turning back, some impulse made her enter the barn.

A hen squawking sleepily fluttered out of her way. She crossed herself with a beating heart. She stood looking at the coffin; she laid her hands

on the sides and pressed her forehead against the crucifix that Ephrem had carved.

(4)

The day came when Pierre and his wife were to leave Trois Pistoles. It was the last day of October. After a fortnight of cold and windy weather the sun poured down from a sky as serene and intensely blue as June, every hint of chill withdrawn from the mellow atmosphere ; Indian summer, hot and still and glowing ; something so magical in the warmth that one might without surprise have seen the trees again burst into full leaf and the fields turn green. But to Alma fierce gusts and rains and all the unkindness of nature would have been more welcome.

Pierre had been full of the idea that Ephrem and Alma should go with him and P'tit Ange as far as Quebec, have a day there with some relatives of his own, and then see them into the train that would take them to the States. Alma had been tempted by the plan but she soon dismissed it. She feared the excitement for her father, who was best kept quiet, and fancied that P'tit Ange did not encourage the plan. There was, besides, the question of money. They could not afford to go. Ephrem had perhaps a few hundred dollars in the bank, but it was long since he had added to that store. For ordinary purposes his bank was under his bed, in a wooden box strapped and padlocked : silver and copper and dollar bills. His daughters had always thought he kept great sums of money in the old wooden box. But a doubt was beginning

to creep into Alma's mind. She had a suspicion that most of the contents of the box had been taken out to pay for the extravagance of P'tit Ange's wedding. Anyhow they could not go with Pierre and P'tit Ange to Quebec.

The blue house was deserted; left neat and clean for its new owner, Joe Bernard, when he had married Victorine Guay. Pierre and his wife spent their last night under Ephrem's roof. He went off, early in the morning, to the station to see about the luggage, and P'tit Ange drove up later with Alma and her father.

"I do not want to go. I never thought I would leave Trois Pistoles. I want to stay with you," P'tit Ange said timidly, almost in a whisper. Her face looked drawn and miserable. She gazed about her with devouring eyes, as if she wanted to carry every familiar image with her. "I shall not like America and the English people there. I wish Pierre had been contented here."

"That is natural," Alma consoled her. "And perhaps he will come back sooner than you think. He is changeable, Pierre. But you will be very happy once you settle down. And when the baby is here—think of that happiness coming." P'tit Ange smiled wanly, accepting the fact that a coming baby meant happiness, but unable to feel anything but sickness and dread of exile.

A number of friends who had driven up in their buckboards to see the young couple off, hitched their horses to the wooden stakes beside the station. Pierre was walking up and down the platform with three or four of these friends,

and he met his wife with the news that the train was an hour late. He and the men went off to smoke in the wilderness of ground laurel and fireweed behind the little wooden shack that was the station; but the women, conscious of their best clothes, withdrew into the smelly little waiting-room that from one end of the year to the other knew neither cleaning nor airing, seated themselves decorously on a wooden bench, and began to talk.

“ Well, it is an enormous change for you, P’tit Ange Charette, to be going away from here to a great city.”

“ And all the grand things you will see. Picture theatres, and lights in the streets. And such beautiful churches. And fine clothes. It is well to be you.”

“ And they say in every house you find hot water in the taps, if you can believe it ! ”

“ It is grander than Rimouski or even Quebec, Pierre was telling us.”

“ You will write often and describe it all.”

“ Of course the young like change. But for myself I’d be homesick to think of leaving my own village.”

“ Oh, the young Charettes will be back on a visit before long as rich as you please, and then they will look down on all of us quiet people.”

“ Remember that your little one must be a good Frenchman, P’tit Ange. Don’t let the Americans get him.”

Alma listened to the chatter, saying little herself, holding her sister’s hand in hers.

The long slow whistle of a train, lumbering

heavily up a steep grade, sent them all out into the sunshine, but it was only a freight train. They returned to the waiting-room, to gossip about the village. The mention of Joe Bernard's name made Alma whisper :

“ If you are not able to be happy in the States, P'tit Ange, you must make Pierre bring you back. It is' no use dying of loneliness. I wish he was a contented man like other people. But there, I am sure you will like it—St. Louis. And if not, I am always waiting for you.”

The train came in, a sympathetic local that waited obligingly an extra ten minutes while the men surrounded Pierre, shaking hands and wishing him luck, and the women kissed P'tit Ange. One of the young men laughingly presented her with a bouquet of laurel and fireweed as a souvenir of home. With smiles and waving hands the travellers stood on the platform at the back of the train, anxious to see the last glimpse of their native place. Pierre was excited and gay, and P'tit Ange also had brightened into a trembling gaiety. She wore the royal blue suit, now buttoning rather narrowly over her slightly awkward young figure, that had been part of her trousseau, and a royal blue hat, trimmed with cherries, that was much admired. It drained every bit of colour out of her face, but under it her waving fair hair looked very soft and pretty. As she stood clinging to Pierre as the train began to move, Alma thought her loveliness itself. She adored her. She was hers, hers, hers. And she was being torn from her.

“ Good luck, good luck. Come back soon,”

called the young men, and the women echoed, "A safe journey."

"And be sure to say to Hyacinthe that I am not in the least angry, but that he must write," Ephrem's trembling voice added.

"God keep you all," Pierre called heartily. "We shall be back soon for a visit, when we make some money."

P'tit Ange did not trust herself to speak, but she nodded her red cherries and waved her handkerchief until the train rounded a curve and they were gone.

In the sunny blankness of the station Alma turned to Ephrem, lost in a long wandering maze of words about his sons, and led him to their calèche.

"Now I'll tell you—you will both come home with Moise and me for a meal," Mme. Pradet said, putting a kind, fat hand on Alma's arm. "We have a nice little bit of pork and a partridge. I know what it is to lose a family out of one's house, and it will cheer you both to be with neighbours. A fine little piece of pork will cheer you."

But Alma refused her hospitality in a rough ungracious fashion, and could not be persuaded to change her mind.

The little procession of vehicles left the station and, one by one, they overtook and passed the Lebel's calèche. Alma pulled the horse, left last and alone on the road, to a walk, with Ephrem now fallen silent beside her. The road was soft with dust and the ditches thick with bracken and laurel; a tangle of Michaelmas daisies still flowered bravely. Here and there a tall spire of brilliant

pink fireweed lifted itself from the spongy ground, beyond the fences. The air, indescribably sweet and warm, was filled with the sounds of insects and birds. The day glowed precious as a jewel dropped unexpectedly into their hands.

Alma could have bent her head to an icy sleet, and fought the elements with joy, but this treasure of heat and colour could not reach her empty heart.

(5)

Indian summer held for a week, golden days of languor and still heat by which the women profited, turning out their houses from top to bottom in preparation for the winter ; scrubbing walls, floors and ceilings ; hanging the *catalogne* carpets across the fences to be beaten. It was a sort of holiday moment of the year, in spite of the hard work. The harder work of the summer was finished, the men were away in the concessions. House cleaning permitted ample opportunity for chatting with neighbours. The children were folded in the convent school for the day, and the mothers had leisure to enjoy cleaning and scouring. An amiable rivalry existed as to which of them should boast the whitest pine ceilings and the neatest kitchens, but there was small choice where all held admirable standards of cleanliness. There were, of course, exceptions; Chose-la-Galette for example, the crazy woman and village slattern, lived in a sort of tumble-down pig-stye that was never turned out or repaired ; and there was a cluster of huts on the beach where a little colony

of half-breed Indians lived like animals in burrows, as Mme. Pradet disdainfully said. But these were outside the self-respecting inhabitants of the place.

Alma, like her neighbours, turned out her house, and she got through her work very much quicker than they did. Partly because Ephrem, who no longer had his other farm, was at home to help her ; partly owing to the comparative isolation of the house, and her natural disinclination for company, she carried on her work vigorously without interruption. When the house was scrubbed and swept, and the bits of furniture put back where they belonged, she put up her double windows and set Ephrem to stuffing the cracks with rags, pasted over with long strips of brown paper. They were then ready to face the winter almost hermetically sealed from any possibility of fresh air for the next seven months.

A fine warm afternoon found her with her tasks all done and a rare hour of idleness with which to do what she liked. Ephrem was off her hands, gone with Moise Pradet to the next parish to see an old friend. She rocked on the gallery in a pleasant tranquillity, satisfied to have the house in order and feeling it good to rest. Soon, she hoped, there would be a letter from P'tit Ange to say how she was getting on. It was already four days since she had left. How long it seemed. It made her ache to think of her ; not that she did not still think that the marriage had been the best thing possible, but because P'tit Ange seemed to have withdrawn from her all sympathy and under-

standing, to have shut her out quite deliberately and coldly from any real confidence. Alma felt it like a wound although, not even to herself, could she have expressed the feeling in words.

She saw Tancredi Bienvenu come along the dusty road with his bandy-legged, loping walk, a squat, black little man in the white dust and sunlight, indeed not much favoured by nature in any light or aspect. To her surprise he came up the hill and directly to the verandah, removing his hat and mopping his heated forehead with his sleeve.

“Good-morning, Tancredi. Would you like a drink of water. Help yourself from the pail in the shade there. You will find a cup beside it.”

He thanked her and drank, and then leaned his arms on the railing of the gallery, and said :

“You are a fine woman, Alma Lebel, and I have always said so. It is a pity you never married,” fixing his shifty sullen eyes on her. “I wouldn’t say even now that it was too late. Some prefer their fruit well ripened.”

“If you have nothing better to say than that, good-day to you,” Alma returned sharply.

“There is no occasion to get angry because I want to speak seriously to you,” Tancredi said. “It is true I have never been married myself, but none the less I know something about women. It is natural they should work for a man.”

Tancredi, to anyone’s knowledge, was not married, but he was suspected of having a squaw and a brood of little Indians in one of the disreputable huts on the beach, three or four miles from

his own dwelling. He was an odd character, not much liked by the men, although he smoked with them regularly every night in the grocer's shop, and generally disregarded by the women except for a civil greeting in passing. That he should approach a house unasked was unheard of, and Alma was ill-pleased that he had chosen hers.

"Since you have had your drink of water, you can go now," she said.

"Not so fast, Alma Lebel. I came to say something to you. I begin to think that I would like a creature of my own, and I am not badly off. I would not ask you to come and live on the beach, but what is to prevent our getting married, and I will come and live here? I can do a great deal of hard work for you, and now you have no man about, except the poor old father who has lost his wits, you might be very glad to consider it. I work well at my boats, and sell well, and I have something put by——"

"Are you demented yourself, Tancredi, with your insults?" she demanded, staring at him, too curious to be angry.

"I have all my wits," Tancredi returned doggedly. "I am asking you to marry me, Alma. At your age you cannot expect any fine offers. I drink moderately and I am a hard worker. You could do worse."

"Will you leave now? If I am troubled by you again M. le curé will have something to say to you. Be off, you Indian!"

Her anger blazed high suddenly. She put all the weight of her fury and contempt into the last

two words, and Tancrède's sullen eyes flashed a vicious look.

"Be careful how you insult a man. I make you an honest and good offer, and you can't be civil. There's a woman for you! You need a husband. Will you take me?"

"Is it likely? I want no husband, and if the salvation of my soul depended on marrying an Indian I would not take you. Now be off about your business. I have no more time to waste. Keep away from this house or it will be the worse for you."

"Very well. But I meant no disrespect," Tancrède replied in a submissive voice. "I have said you were a fine woman when others thought you were enough to frighten the crows, and I still think you a fine woman. You can think about me. I may give you another chance."

Alma looked at him, threw him a phrase calculated to offend beyond pardon, entered her house and slammed the door in his face.

He shook his fist at the closed door, muttered to himself, then turned and shambled away down the dusty road.

CHAPTER THIRD

(1)

THE third winter after P'tit Ange's departure was long and severe. Beginning early in November, more snow fell than had been known before Christmas for many years. It was bitterly cold and stormy. Ephrem, who had been failing rapidly in the past few months, kept almost entirely indoors, sitting smoking in the warm kitchen, now and then making some little pretence of helping Alma with her household tasks, but often dozing in his chair for many hours. Sometimes he took his knife and carved a bit of wood in an aimless fashion. Alma encouraged him to make birds and small wooden toys for P'tit Ange's children, who were always coming on a visit and never came. Ephrem was confused as to the children, but he worked away happily if he was coaxed, and spoke of the surprise he would give "the little ones" at New Year.

P'tit Ange had two babies now, Lucie-Alma and Joseph, and another coming, but Pierre had not yet made enough money to bring them all back on a visit. Alma was forced to be patient and to wait for the happy day, so long delayed, when she should see her sister again. She treasured all the letters that came from St. Louis, read them

aloud over and over to Ephrem in the evenings, and she fell hungrily upon and studied tirelessly, each photograph that P'tit Ange sent of herself and Pierre and the babies. The most recent group was taken on a postcard, and she gazed at it many times a day; Pierre, grown a little bolder and coarser but as gay and self-assured as ever, held Lucie in his arms, an alert child with a determined expression and a smart plaid frock; P'tit Ange, looking very youthful and almost too fragile to support the sprawling overgrown baby in her lap, smiled proudly at it. The faint hollow of the cheek, the large eyes and thin hands betrayed the delicacy following too frequent motherhood, but P'tit Ange seemed well-pleased with life. Though the fat healthy children were a matter of pride, what they cost her and the rapidity of their appearance horrified her secretly. But she understood that one must make "one's family": it was woman's part in life, and it was all to her glory to have as many stars in her crown as possible. The divine Mother of one Son rejoiced in each infant born to her praise, and when P'tit Ange shrank from the knowledge that she was called upon to bear another child, her sister-in-law Marie Bellechasse consoled her with the thought that later on she would have time to enjoy herself.

So she said nothing of her troubles when she wrote to Alma, dwelt on Lucie's sweet little ways and remarkable beauty and intelligence, on the robustness of Joseph—undeniable even in a snapshot—on the comfort and convenience of her house; wrote, at length, of Pierre's cleverness and

advancement in business. Pierre was still something of a rover and changed his work from time to time, but he liked St. Louis and did not speak of returning to Canada, except for that promised and deferred visit to Trois Pistoles.

(2)

With the turn of the year the weather grew worse. Gales raged from the Atlantic, and the drifts piled up so deep before the door that Alma feared they would be snow-bound. She had to dig a fresh path to the barn each day, in order to get to the hens and the cow, and fewer visitors than ever came near the cottage.

She got up several times in the night to feed the stove with wood as the temperature dropped with dangerous speed when the fire went low. In spite of her care Ephrem caught cold. She kept him in bed, heaped blankets on him, gave him pine syrup for his cough, but he got no better. She called the doctor in one day as he was passing in his red cariole. He assured her that it was nothing at all, and spoke heartily to the old man, with a joke about his wisdom in taking to his bed while the weather was so villainous. No such fortune for him when all the eleven little Bérubés had measles together, with women back in the concessions who insisted on "making purchases," and expected him to attend the conclusion of the bargain, snow or no snow! Dr. Rivard laughed and shook the melting snow off his raccoon coat hissing against the stove, and went off promising to look in again when he had time to spare.

Ephrem lay in bed tranquilly enough when his cough did not trouble him, his fine gaunt head high against the pillows, his black eyes still full of life. The natural dignity that had always distinguished him increased now that the look of departure was on him. Alma saw it clearly, in spite of Dr. Rivard; the old man's lean hands, folded and pallid on the patchwork quilt had let go their last feeble hold of temporal things. She put his knife and a bird that he had begun to cut out beside him, but he made no attempt to go on with it. He talked a little sometimes, quite rationally, about everyday things, the snow, the farm, P'tit Ange's last letter, but for the most part he lay quiet, like one waiting for a signal.

He was worse in February, weaker, and his cough increased and kept him awake at night. By day he was distressed and restless. Though he did not seem to be in pain or in immediate danger Alma watched him carefully. Then one evening towards ten o'clock when she was thinking of going to bed, he spoke with a long forgotten authority.

"Leave what you are doing, my girl. I have an urgent matter for you." He sat up in bed, a flush on his cheeks, his eyes alight. "I want my coffin brought into this house at once. At once, do you hear? It is ready for me, and I am ready for it at last. I have waited a long time. Tomorrow you will get the curé to bless it, and after that I will make my confession. But the coffin first, Alma, the coffin."

"Yes, yes," Alma promised soothingly, trying

with a persuasive hand to make him lie back. "To-morrow early we shall see about it."

"Not to-morrow — to-night — now! I can wait no longer. I will go for it myself." He tried to get out of bed, his excitement mounting, and she could hardly restrain him.

"It is so stormy—listen to the wind! In the morning it will be better, and time enough. The snow is heavy by the barn."

"Let me go myself. I know where it is placed by the door, to be ready. For years I have wanted it in the house and you have refused it to me, Alma. But now I will have it beside me. The house is empty and there is room. All the children have gone, and Zélie long ago, and I am ready. My coffin that I made is not yet blessed perhaps, but it has all the holy symbols that I carved on it, and I could rest if it were beside me."

He struggled from her hands and succeeded in getting out of bed. He clung trembling and excited to the post, the eyes so alive and wild in his dying face that she felt a thrill of terror. When he tried to move towards the door he almost fell. Alma flung her arms round him.

"I will do what you wish, but you must go back to bed. Be reasonable. I always do what you wish."

"You are a good girl, Alma—but will you do it now, at once?" the old man said, still resisting her.

"Let me see you quiet in bed first," she said, speaking as gently as if he were a sick child.

Ephrem let her help him back into bed, cover

him up and give him some warm milk to drink, but his impatience increased again and a terrible excitement shook him.

“ Now, now ! ” he begged.

Alma pinned a shawl round her shoulders, pulled on a pair of long leather boots that went well above her knees and prepared to go out to the barn. She spoke firmly.

“ You must be reasonable. You will lie quite still till I come ? I may be some time because the snow is very heavy. But you will not try to get up ? You promise ? ”

He promised, feeling for the beads that hung over the head of his bed, his excitement subsiding.

“ You are a good girl. ”

She turned the lamp down a little, removed it from his reach, stoked the stove, opened the door and went out.

(3)

The wind, still high, lifted the dry fine snow in great spirals and blew it sharp and stinging against her face. The sky was clear and bright with stars, shining with that quivering brilliance that foretells a period of intensely cold weather. An icy crust had formed on the drifts but a foot or more of powdery snow lay loosely on the surface making walking difficult. She slipped and fell, recovered, slid most of the way to the barn door, and then had to use her wooden shovel to remove the drifts which had piled up since the morning.

There was extraordinary vitality in the night. The fine drift of snow, blown before the wind,

sparkled like diamond dust and sifted thickly over her hair and shoulders as she worked. It was very cold, but after the bright stuffiness of the cottage, the remote dark sky lit by myriad star-points, the shrouded fir-trees, the unbroken whiteness of the fields, the purity of the air, and even the stinging wind that obliged her to shut her eyes and glued her lashes together till it was an effort to open them, startled her with their exquisite strangeness as if she had slipped into a new world.

For a moment the reason why she was out of the house slid from her mind. She was possessed by excitement, her blood raced in her veins. It was a night to be alive in. Then as she succeeded in pushing the barn door inch by inch open, she recollected with a shock why she was there and a chill fear gripped her. She hesitated, a prayer on her lips, then went boldly into the barn, seized the coffin by one of the wooden handles and dragged it with great exertion (it was much heavier than she had supposed) out on to the path she had cleared, leaving a commotion among the hens as she slammed the door to.

She waited a moment, breathless, then seized the handle again and hauled her gruesome burden to the foot of the steep short cut she had made in coming. She got a little way and fell, and was obliged to sit on the snow pulling with both hands to keep the coffin from slipping back. Presently she found her feet and managed to drag it higher, though its clumsiness and weight nearly pulled her back into the road. Almost at the top her

feet went suddenly from under her on the ice. Flinging herself half on the coffin, to hold it, she was carried headlong down the hill on to the road on her sinister toboggan. As she struggled out of the deep snow at the bottom she heard sleigh-bells. Three men in a cariole, coming slowly along the heavy road, drew up to see what was happening.

"Hullo! who is there? Is there anything we can do?" called one. She recognised the voice of Joe Bernard, who had bought Pierre's house. Overcome by furious distress and shame she could neither explain nor ask them to help her, and she did not speak at all.

"But what on earth is happening, in the middle of the night? Do you want help?" another called.

"No—nothing is wrong," she managed to shout brusquely. "Go on. Heavy roads after the storm."

They hesitated, staring at her curiously. It was an odd thing to see a woman seated on what seemed to be a wooden chest sunken in the snow, her hands folded beneath her shawl in a night of nipping wind, her black hair uncovered. She heard one of them mutter in an undertone.

"It's the man-woman Lebel. Come on, she doesn't want us. Let us go."

"It's all right—I know my own business," she called out sharply. "You can go on. Good-night."

The men said good-night respectfully; Joe shook up the reins and they jingled off slowly. They were puzzled, but it was plain that they were in her way, whatever she was doing.

She remembered a piece of rope in the barn. The idea occurred to her that by tying the rope to one of the handles she might success in dragging the coffin up the hill. This after infinite trouble she managed to do, her hands now numb and her body shivering with cold. The snow had got up her sleeves and over her boots, and her teeth began to chatter.

She found that she had lost her superstitious fear of the coffin. She sat on it at the door to get her breath before going in to Ephrem. The stillness was unbroken except by the gusty swirl of the snow. The beautiful glittering night under the stars woke some immemorial longing in her. She stretched out her arms in a gesture of passion, and lifted a tormented face to the sky.

(4)

Ephrem lived another fortnight. The coffin duly blessed, and covered with a new strip of blue and white homespun woven by Alma, was by his own wish pushed lengthwise against the wall of his bedroom, where he could see it. He was confessed and at peace, and slept away his last days troubled no longer by the fancies of his brain, awaking to remember his sons sometimes as if they were still little boys playing about the door, and calling Alma "Zélie," which had been her mother's name. The snow that fell steadily again, the driving winds that roared round the chimney at night, did not disturb him.

A singular tranquillity held Alma too. In this gentle passing there was nothing fearful. She

moved about the house solemn and quiet as if she, like Ephrem, awaited a signal long desired.

Mme. Pradet came in and out, full of kindness, a bustling sanctity and excitement in her expression, and urged Alma to telegraph for P'tit Ange. This was the moment, she said, when duty should bring her with her children to her father's bedside; she and her little ones should receive his blessing before he ceased to be of time. She would never forgive it if she were not sent for, and whatever effort it cost to travel from the States, she had good and sufficient reason for making the journey now.

Alma, with doubt, spoke of the dreadful weather, but Mme. Pradet readily assured her that in the States the weather was quite fine, that by the time P'tit Ange could reach home the storms would probably be over. The duty of both sisters to Ephrem was clear, Mme. Pradet asserted decisively, the one to send the message, the other to respond. Alma consented, and when P'tit Ange's godmother hurried off, full of consequence, to telegraph, she sat in her father's room trembling with the anticipated joy of the meeting. She had not the slightest doubt that P'tit Ange would come. A telegram was in itself such a tremendous thing to her mind that it seemed a summons that no one could disregard. She was awed to think that she had set in motion the forces that would carry her little sister back to her after three years, and her tenderness extended itself to the two babies, especially to her namesake, Lucie-Alma. How wonderful to see them all, to feel her loneliness at an end! She

prayed for their safe journey while she prayed for her father's passing soul.

There was no telegram next day, but she was happily sure that that was because P'tit Ange had started at once and was now coming towards her as fast as possible. "She was probably not near the post-office, and would telegraph from Quebec by what train to expect her." This she said on Tuesday, and early on Wednesday morning Ephrem passed imperceptibly from sleep to death.

At once, it seemed to Alma, her house was filled with people she had scarcely spoken to of late years, all wishing to do for her what she was well-accustomed to do for herself. She dressed herself fittingly in an old black dress that had been worn by her mother on occasions of mourning, and listened docilely enough to Mme. Pradet when she told her that she must sit in the dark, disused parlour in suitable dignity to receive the people who came in to pray. The time was long to her, sitting there looking at the wax hand wearing her mother's wedding ring, on its bed of orange blossoms and encased in glass, the ornament of the middle table; at the crayon portraits of Ephrem and Zélie as bride and groom; other family treasures, including some pressed flowers from P'tit Ange's bridal bouquet, and postcard photographs of wedding groups. She thought of P'tit Ange coming nearer every hour. The funeral was fixed for Saturday, that would allow plenty of time for her to arrive.

Alma remembered that she had not made ready for her or the children. She deserted her post,

went upstairs and occupied herself in preparing for them. It was dream-like and joyful to be expecting them. She wondered what changes time had made in her sister ; and if she would rejoice to come home. She would be sad because of her father. P'tit Ange had always loved him, but she would be happy that he was free from his long trouble, as Alma was happy for him.

Ephrem lay in his bed still, candles at his head and feet. Two sisters from the convent prayed continually beside him. Alma knelt with them that night when all other visitors had gone, and prayed fervently, a sense of loss beginning for the first time to make itself felt. He had been a great deal to her, the old man, dependent and helpless for so long, and she would miss him sorely. She began to realise the march of life, the final secret of death. She looked at the remote, dignified face and longed to ask, " What was it like—to die ? "

(5)

On Friday morning there came a telegram from Pierre that P'tit Ange could not travel. She had been very ill and had lost her third child. It was impossible for him to leave her, though she was better now. They both sent condolences and shared Alma's grief ; they would make a spiritual bouquet of their prayers.

Alma felt a throb of pride at receiving so long a telegram, but the disappointment was a powerful one. She had built on P'tit Ange's coming. She went up to her room—ready now for two as in the

old days—and for the first time in her life she locked her door. Later on Mme. Pradet knocked in vain.

“Alma, my dear, Lucky Boivin wants to see you. Can you come?”

“I cannot come. Leave me alone,” Alma’s heavy voice replied after a time.

“But it is to consult you——”

“I cannot come. Let him ask you.”

Mme. Pradet bustled off, well pleased to manage affairs, and informed the inquiring blacksmith, who was also the undertaker when occasion required, that she was instructed to act for Alma. It was a question of the coffin. Lucky Boivin did not care to bury anybody except in one of his own pine coffins, but apart from the personal aspect, he had discovered that the coffin fashioned and carved for himself by Ephrem was so enormously large and heavy, that, in the present state of the roads, it would be impossible to convey it to the cemetery which was difficult to approach at all times, and in any weather, being situated at the top of an extremely steep hill at a considerable distance from the village. Lucky wanted humbly to suggest to Alma that Ephrem’s body should be carried to the mortuary chapel within the gates in one of his coffins. When the real burial took place in the spring, the body should be transferred to the carved ash coffin that had so long been the legend of three parishes.

Mme. Pradet acquiesced in the suggestion: certainly his idea was most practical, and indeed, the only possible thing to do. She despatched Lucky to attend to the matter at once. The affair

was concluded before Alma appeared again, looking half stupid, Mme. Pradet thought, in spite of a burning brightness in her eyes. Mme. Pradet had some qualms when she saw her, knowing the man-woman's masterful temper. She had much enjoyed her temporary authority, and felt that it would furnish interesting material for gossip in the shop. But Alma displayed no anger. She walked silently in and looked at Ephrem, still serene and nobly composed although he slept in uncarved pine, with no holy symbols about him, his pains and preparation set at naught.

"Yes, it is the only possible thing in this storm. I see that. The coffin will remain here. I am used to it. It will be company for me, and may serve me well some day."

Alma was eccentric, as Tancredi Bienvenu insisted, Mme. Pradet realised with a shiver.

When the funeral was over she tidied Ephrem's room, putting all his little possessions carefully away and pulling down the blinds. She removed the wooden box in which he had kept his money and papers, such as they were, to her own room, and locked her father's door.

She was now quite alone.

(6)

She found one hundred and fifty dollars and a little odd silver and copper money in the box, besides Ephrem's other treasures and trifles, and several scrawled documents showing that he had at different times lent money to friends, none of which appeared to have been repaid or asked for

again. They were small sums for the most part—ten dollars to Joe Tremblay to repair a fence, five dollars and fifty cents to Anatole Bossé to buy a pig, and so on. But to her surprise Alma found that the most considerable debtor was Tançrède, who had borrowed rather larger sums, amounting in all to something over a hundred dollars. There appeared to be no debts. In the bank at Rimouski was nearly a thousand dollars, which seemed immense riches to Alma until Pierre wrote to remind her that half of everything of course belonged to P'tit Ange. She collected the small sums due to her father by the simple and usual method of asking the curé to cry them in church. No names were mentioned, but the curé in inviting all debtors to the estate of the late Ephrem Lebel to pay their dues promptly to him, warned his hearers that unless they did so within a month he would call their names and the sums owed explicitly; if after that they still delayed, he would put the matter into the hands of the law. No such proceeding was necessary as the money was returned within the time. All but Tançrède's debt, and as he seldom went to church perhaps he had not heard the threat. But the law was not invoked in his case, Alma preferring to leave the matter alone for the present.

Spring was late and cold. Then, suddenly, it seemed as if in a single night the fields were yellow with daisies and buttercups, and every little garden was sweet with purple lilac. The women who took in summer visitors, were scrubbing their houses, airing the beds, making the fences smart

with white-wash, and generally preparing for their profitable season.

Alma, walking through her fields in the summer dusk, untouched by the pleasant bustle that affected most of her neighbours, encountered Tancredi trotting in his rapid, silent fashion towards the village, his head bent, with his usual air of half-furtive resolution. She greeted him civilly, and paused, almost deciding to speak of the money he owed her. While she hesitated his sharp eyes glanced at her face and an idea of amazing impudence flashed into his head. She found herself seized round the waist, and to her horror, he pressed his black, Indian face against hers, and kissed her with a sort of snarl, like an animal about to bite. She was powerful enough to fling him off. She snatched up a stone and threatened him with it, but her heart was beating with a sickening violence as she faced him. He drew back staring at her with hardihood.

“Every woman wants to be kissed, and you like the rest,” he said. “Are you not tired of being alone yet? Are you not ready to marry me? You would not regret it.”

“You want to marry me so that you will not have to repay me what you owed my father,” Alma said, recovering herself, no longer afraid. “But you will find that I mean to be paid back, and in addition, since you insult me for the second time, I shall have you put out of the village and sent to Le Plein with the other Indians. Respectable people will have no more to do with you after this. You will see if they will let you in at Pradet’s shop.”

“You think you will be listened to—a crazy Lebel!” Tancredi bluffed.

“You owed a crazy Lebel money, more than a hundred dollars, for long enough. Now you will pay.”

Tancredi began to cringe.

“Do not be hard on me. I will pay when I can. I swear I will, and I will not insult you, Alma Lebel. I will not even speak to you, if you will leave me alone. I will even help you to get another husband, since you will not take me. I will tell the young fellows that they could do worse. An opinion like that is worth something.”

“Walk in front of me,” Alma said contemptuously. “Vermin must be watched. You have lost your head since we were kind to you and let you play your fiddle at P’tit Ange’s wedding.”

“It was then that I admired you,” Tancredi said boldly. “Consider again, Alma—I speak with respect. You will soon be too old for anyone. Do you not want a husband?”

Alma retorted in a manner that made Tancredi cringe again. She drove him before her with scathing words till they reached the road. She meant to follow him to the shop, but he suddenly doubled and vanished noiselessly into the woods.

She went on herself, and burst in on the circle of men smoking beneath the swinging oil-lamp in the grocery, blazing with excitement to denounce the boat-builder. They listened in wide-mouthed incredulity, but spoke soothingly to her. She realised that they did not believe her and flung herself out of the shop.

In half an hour Tancredi was among them as usual. He denied having seen Alma for months past. He laughed and tapped his forehead when they told him of her visit.

“Another crazy Lebel,” he said, and on the whole they inclined to believe him.

(7)

An idea came to Alma ; it took possession of her mind, and would not let her rest. She never admitted that she owed it to Tancredi ; but the memory of what it led her to do, later, made her burn with shame. At the time it was as if a force outside of herself drove her.

She might get married after all. She was not so old, not yet thirty-four ; she had a house, a fortune, and was not so bad-looking. She was lonely ; she had terrible thoughts alone in her house, since P'tit Ange did not come and there was no one else to care about her or need her. A woman did require someone to work for, sure enough. She cast her thoughts over the village and found that there were at least three men who might be glad of a wife of her means and ability, for whom she would not be too old. She remembered how the young fellows had always hung about the door to see P'tit Ange come to church, how they had followed her in to continue gazing at her and had again been at the door to get a word with her as she came out. Church was the place to be seen. She would go to mass at ten o'clock every Sunday instead of early in the morning, and she would wear her best clothes—she had a new black dress and

hat to mourn Ephrem, and just see if anything would happen. Filled with excitement, she made her plans.

Sunday after Sunday she arrived in good time at the church door, lingered outside with a half-expectant air, and then took her place as if she was of importance in the parish. It puzzled her neighbours, she had always been so retiring, so self-sufficing, so indifferent. They were civil but too occupied with their own affairs to take more than perfunctory notice of her, even when she stood about afterwards as if she timidly hoped for further signs of friendliness. She was awkward and shy and had nothing to say after she had replied to their enquiries as to her health and given the news of P'tit Ange. From her pew she eyed the three men she had fixed on as likely to be attracted by the advantages of marrying her; two were widowers with families, one a stranger in the place, an unmarried, elderly man, provided with a gaunt sister as housekeeper. Alma felt no real interest in any of the three, but she had a desperate feeling that she must show them that she was worthy of attention. Not one of them seemed to see her. So it continued all summer. Her air of watchfulness began to strike the young people as highly absurd. In her turn she was watched and, behind her back, imitated and made fun of. She overheard comments and jibes. What did she want—a husband? This seemed such a fantasy to the young man who suggested it, that he and his admiring listeners went off into fits of laughter. He followed up his success by imitating Alma's

hobbling walk in her cramping Sunday shoes, staring anxiously round him with a face of exaggerated solemnity, breaking into rapid and timid smiles, all the time holding his hands out stiffly as Alma did hers in her black gloves.

Alma saw him, but showed no sign that she understood what was meant. She climbed into her buckboard with a grim expression on her face, and slapped the reins on Ti Fine's back.

"They laugh at me," she said to herself, smarting, but assured that she deserved it. "But it is I who ought to laugh at myself for a fine fool. Well, I will laugh."

She put away her Sunday shoes and gloves and black clothes. She could go to early mass well enough in her working clothes, if she went at all. But she felt like hiding away, and was glad of her empty house with no one to know her shame. She had prayed to St. Joseph and had exhibited herself in vain. If she had cried her desires on the house tops and had been publicly condemned she could not have felt more humiliation.

PART II
LUCIE

CHAPTER FOURTH

(1)

P'TIT ANGE lived twelve years after her marriage, and bore eight children, only four of whom survived. She died of what seemed to be a trifling fever, but as her sister-in-law, Marie Bellechasse, said not unsympathetically, she was just looking for an excuse to die. She was not unhappy with Pierre, who continued fond of her, and never hit her when he had had too much to drink, although he was rough with the children. But he would never let her go home to see Alma, though she hated St. Louis after a year of it. P'tit Ange was an exhausted and pinched little scrap, prematurely old, long before she died, with the promised "time to enjoy herself" still ahead of her. She thought incessantly of Alma as she lay ill, but no one sent for her. Perhaps it was just as well that Alma never knew of the change in her looks; her pretty fair hair lifeless, her eyes sunken, her hands like dry claws. She had got used to it herself. . . .

One thing she had always been determined upon, and she made Pierre solemnly promise to carry out her wish if she were to die; Lucie, her eldest child and the only girl, was to be sent to Alma to be brought up a Canadian. Pierre was always threatening to change his name to Carter as his

brother had done, and to make the three boys American citizens, but his wife passionately resented the thought. She wished to have Lucie saved from the life of a city. It consoled her to think that one of her children should lead the life that was so familiar to her, for which she never ceased to be homesick.

After her death they found her desire repeated over and over in writing—a letter to Pierre, a letter to Alma, one to Marie Bellechasse, another to the child herself. Pierre made haste to carry out her wish. Though he was quite fond of her, it suited him very well to give up Lucie. She was more expensive than the boys, whom he meant to make work as soon as possible. The one thing he had not counted on was that Lucie should so much resent being sent away. He was at first pleased, and then angry when she threw herself down, kicked and screamed, declaring that she would not go. He tried to be patient, but he ended by cuffing her ears and “giving her something to cry for.” After that Lucie relapsed into sulks.

It was wildly exciting news in Trois Pistoles that P'tit Ange Lebel's little girl was coming to live with her aunt, who was becoming more and more of a legendary figure in the village, living as she now did like a hermit, and going to church at most once a year. She had quarrelled with Mme. Pradet, the only woman who had ever gone much to the house, and admitted no one else on any pretext. She was seen in her fields ploughing, sowing, reaping, dressed in a man's old coat and cap and long leather boots; fetching water from

the common well by the roadside, two heavy buckets slung on a wooden yoke which she carried across her shoulders as easily as any labourer; toiling with axe and saw to get in her supply of wood for the winter. She ignored her neighbours, and was short with anyone who spoke to her. Her property had dwindled; she had sold her horse and hired one for ploughing. She now owned only three fields, her house set on a hill of unprofitable scrub and stone, and the big barn below, which was falling rapidly into disrepair. She was forever painting and mending her house. One year she roofed it with wooden slats, unaided, of course, and as cleverly as any man, and it never lacked white-wash and scrubbing inside. She was keeping it ready for P'tit Ange and the children, who must come some day.

But P'tit Ange, who had gone away so hopefully, dressed in royal blue with red cherries dangling from her trousseau hat, waving the bunch of fireweed and laurel Pierre's friends had given her, was not coming back after all, it seemed. Alma stared stupefied, at the letter that brought her, in four pages, the news of her illness (which had been nothing at all till she died of it), of her death, and the bequest of Lucie-Alma, now ten years old.

It was incredible that P'tit Ange could have died without any warning, that she was never to see her again. She looked round the cottage; it was waiting for P'tit Ange! She herself was waiting, had waited long, and been very patient because no one else in the world mattered to her. She felt betrayed, outraged. She did not know

whether to curse Pierre Charette, or herself for giving P'tit Ange so gladly to him, or a malevolent God for His indifference to her prayers. When it was dark and no one could see her, she rushed out of the house and walked, distraught, along the beach till, with daylight, she found herself miles away from home. The tide was far out, beneath a grey, cold sky. A flock of crows, black and raucous, winged their way from the cliff, and alighted on the wet sand near the edge of the water in search of their breakfast. Their melancholy cawing gnawed at her heart.

She turned back, cold and exhausted, stumbling along the stones with dragging feet. After what seemed a long time, sick with fatigue, she recognised the collection of tumble-down shacks in which the Indians lived, and knew that she was still some four miles from the village. She could go no further without a rest, and sank down on the beach, to find herself in a moment surrounded by curious, squalid women and staring, black-eyed children, chattering and pointing.

A man appeared from one of the huts and the group scattered. He came over and stared at her. When she saw it was Tancredi Bienvenu she tried to rise and go on.

“Alma Lebel is it?” he asked in astonishment.

“You seem to be sick. What is the matter?”

She answered monotonously. “I am only resting. Leave me alone.”

“It is going to rain. A funny place to rest in.”

He walked away, driving off the children who were creeping back to look at the strange visitor.

When he returned ten minutes later Alma lay face downwards in a fine driving rain.

“The women will let you stay inside the huts till the rain stops. Come, it’s not fit for an animal to lie there,” he said with rough concern. “Josephine—Josephine,” he called.

A young Indian woman came running down the beach. Alma did not resist when she helped her to her feet and led her to one of the shacks.

(2)

She lay on a pallet on the floor of a small outer room, a lean-to of pine boards roughly nailed together, used chiefly to store the baskets, piled high all round the walls, which the Indians made to sell to the English visitors, and peddled through the villages. In one corner was a heap of sweet hay which the young squaw was rapidly sorting and plaiting into long braids as she sat on the floor. There was no window and the narrow door, opening on to the beach, did not let in much light. Alma could see the sky black with tempest and the rain falling, solid and grey. She had drunk a cup of bitter black tea that the Indian women had offered her and felt warmth steal through her. The darkness and the sweet fresh smell of the baskets and the hay soothed her. She heard women scolding, children’s shrill voices, and men in deep, guttural talk close at hand, but was undisturbed. She watched the woman sitting on the floor with head bent, her hands flying as she chose long strands of the hay and, holding them in her teeth, plaited them quickly into smooth, sweet-

smelling braids which she laid aside in a growing pile. It was wonderful how swiftly her fingers moved, how cleverly she chose her grass all of one length, making her plaits even and firm almost to the end, tying them off with a twist of coloured straw, blue, yellow or red. She did not look up or speak once ; did not so much as glance out at the driving rain and mist that made darkness for her to work in. Indians were silent, Alma remembered, but not more silent than she herself. She began to think vaguely that she ought to get up and go home. She had work to do in the house, and there were the chickens, and the cow . . . but she was too drowsy to move yet. Her eyes closed. The lids fell like iron shutters ; it hurt her to keep them shut, but it hurt her more to open them. She slept suddenly.

When she opened her eyes in the late afternoon, the young Indian woman was still sitting on the floor. But now she was making baskets of birch-bark sewed with long coloured threads, an infant swaddled and strapped on a board, propped up beside her. She kept looking at its tiny black head and brown, waving fists and smiling at it. The rain was over and the tide had come up to within a few yards of the door of the shack ; the sky and sea framed by the doorway seemed equally blue and shining. A child playing with a man on the beach, was laughing. The round fat chuckles and exquisite rising shouts, shaken out of its little body, were purely joyful as the song of a bird. Alma, sitting up on her pallet, smiled to hear it. The Indian woman caught her look and smiled at her.

“That’s mine too,” she said proudly. “Three years old—and now this little new-born one.”

Alma, with the gesture of the starving asking for bread, held out her arms. The mother, well-pleased, put the swaddled baby into them, its back safe from injury against the strip of board, its black eyes quaintly wise, its vague, tiny hands moving. The awkward, bedraggled stranger, “a Canadian from far-off,” as the Indian thought, held the stiff, oblong bundle as if it fed and warmed her.

“You have some children?” the mother asked curiously.

“No—but I had a sister. I held her when she was as small as this. Now she is dead.”

It amazed her to find relief in saying this to a poor squaw, but she now wanted to go on talking without bitterness of P’tit Ange. She held the papoose to her breast, sometimes touching its hands devouringly with her lips and talked on and on, quite quietly but as if she could not stop. She had shut herself away from human contact for so long that it scarcely mattered to her that the woman listened as if only half comprehending what she said. Her own voice seemed strange to her, but it was deliverance from misery long hidden within her secret heart to speak at last. She rocked the baby, looked into the dark eyes of the mother kneeling beside her and told her all about her life, her loneliness, and—for the first time remembering the fact—how it would end now because P’tit Ange’s little girl was coming to live with her. There was delight in the thought.

Tancredi, looking into the shack, saw her holding

the papoose—which did not happen to be his—as if she loved it, talking to the mother as if she did not know she was one of the outcast colony held in contempt by the village. He turned away and spat on the beach with emotion.

“I have said before that Alma Lebel was an uncommon woman,” he said to himself, “and this settles it. She is not for me, but I bear her no ill-will after this. I will pay back her money too, some day, when I have time to save it,” he added cautiously.

(3)

Lucie alighted from the train in which she had travelled alone from Quebec, and stood composedly on the wooden platform at Trois Pistoles station waiting for her Tante Alma to find her. This was a very strange place she had come to, she thought, looking round at the wilderness in which she found herself. It seemed terribly lonely. She meant to hate it with all her might, and cry till they took her back to St. Louis with its street-cars and crowds and houses and shops, to the little boys at home who were greedy and cry-babies but who minded her, to her father who beat her often enough but who bought her peanuts and popcorn sometimes. She did not want to give up all these things, it seemed very unfair to take everything away from her just because her mother had died. Lucie, who had been too much for her mother for years past, headstrong and noisy, impatient when she was ill, felt that she was being punished for it now.

Alma, at the back of the station, tying up the old horse she had borrowed, was late because it had travelled much more slowly than she had allowed for. Lucie, the only passenger to alight, had therefore a few solitary moments, but the station-master, Luc Lapointe, hurried forward to assure her that he was glad to see her, that she was expected. This was gratifying, and the little girl felt important. Two or three idlers, who knew that she was P'tit Ange Lebel's daughter, were very much interested in her meeting with Alma now coming forward to embrace her.

"I am your Aunt," Alma said, suddenly shy and awkward in the presence of the small black figure with steady gaze fixed on her. "Oh, dear little Lucie, I am so happy to see you. My little niece! But you are not at all like your mamma."

"And you are not like her," Lucie returned coolly, accepting Alma's embraces without demonstration. She told herself stoutly that she was not afraid of this tall, eager, wild-looking aunt, but her heart sank a little—she was so unlike her pale weak mother, or fat, jolly Marie Bellechasse.

"You will be my little girl now," Alma said, the eagerness in her eyes and voice plain for all the idlers to note as she knelt and took P'tit Ange's child in her arms, all tenderness, and trembling with love as she pressed her to her body.

"Oh, your buttons hurt me," Lucie cried, wriggling out of her arms. Alma was wearing her mother's black dress which was still too good to throw away, and it was fastened with closely-set, round, black buttons from her chin to her waist.

The child rubbed her cheek where they had pressed into it.

"We'll go home now," Alma said softly. An immense joy filled her to think that she had such a treasure to take home with her, her own little niece of flesh and blood to work for : reality again after all her dreams . . . a child to laugh and play in her silent house.

"My home is in St. Louis. I am only staying with you," Lucie said quickly. She spoke French but with an oddness to Alma's ear, due to the fact that she was accustomed to speak English more than French at school and at play.

"Yes, of course my darling," Alma assented. "But now——"

"I have a trunk," Lucie announced importantly. "We mustn't go without that. All my new clothes are in it ; two hats, a flannel petticoat, my first Communion dress—with a beautiful white sash—and new shoes. This is my Sunday dress and hat." She smoothed her skirt with pride.

"Come—we will go," Alma took her by the hand.

"Oh, what a nasty old carriage," Lucie curled her lip when she saw the buckboard. "And what a scarecrow of a horse. They have better carriages and horses in the States."

But she sniffed the salt air with pleasure, as the old horse cautiously moved off down the sandy road, and at the first sight of the village she exclaimed with delight :

"Oh, the dear little houses all blue and yellow ! Do you know children in all of them, Tante Alma, for me to play with ? "

Alma, who had not thought of such a thing, was dismayed. Though she answered that Lucie would find plenty of friends, she was stabbed with jealousy that anyone should share her. Here was pain again, promising to become acute. Was there pain in all human relationships, she wondered. But the thought passed, and she glowed with joy when the neighbours leaned over the palings of their little gardens to look with intense interest at the child beside her, and to call out greetings and a welcome to P'tit Ange's daughter. Alma made little response; she had lost the habit of friendliness, and knew too well that she was regarded as eccentric, but their curiosity was a tribute in its way, and she was satisfied that Lucie was a possession to be very proud of. She was very smart too, in her city clothes, and her determined, vivid little face under the wide black hat was not in the least like a village child's. Lucie looked a city child, alert, keen, able to hold her own, and her silent, adoring aunt thought that her red cheeks, dark eyes, and firm little mouth and her thick, bright brown hair made a picture of remarkable beauty.

"It's me they're looking at," Lucie presently exclaimed, with the same feeling of satisfaction and importance as Luc had given her at the station by telling her that she was expected. This was most exciting; in St. Louis no one had looked at her or cared when she went away. It might be rather nice staying with Tante Alma, after all, if people were going to admire her. . . .

(4)

She was sorry that their house seemed so far away from all the others, but its whitewash and its yellow door pleased her, she thought it exciting to live on the side of a rocky hill, down which you might roll or tumble, if you were not careful, into the road below. How *big* the country was, and how green the fields and trees, but the road was very empty. No people at all. She thought of her three little brothers—they would love this place; she almost wished they were with her, troublesome as they were. She was not sure that she would like it much, even for a short visit, which was all she meant to pay, whatever she had been told about being adopted by Tante Alma. The strong salt air made her feel sleepy. She was tired from all her recent excitement and emotion, and the travelling, and the novelty. Now was the time to cry and make a fuss but, instead, she sat quietly in a rocking-chair on the gallery looking forlorn and subdued, while Alma vibrating with a sensitiveness that clothed her like a new skin, prepared a meal.

She had adorned the mantel and the top of the big, unused stove with jugs of goldenrod and wild meadowsweet. In the middle of the table she had arranged a soup plate full of moss with rock-cranberries planted in it, trailing twin-flower fringing the edge and falling on the cloth, completely hiding the plate. She had seen one of the English summer visitors at Mme. Dufour's decorate her table like that, and she had been struck with a desire to copy it. She loved to pick wild flowers

and leaves, but she knew that there was no sense in decorating a house unless someone was coming to see it, and this had not happened for a long time. But Lucie would always be an excuse in future. She would make the house gay for the child. The rock-cranberries gleamed red and green in their tiny, hard, upright leaves, as firm and as exquisitely coloured and finished as tiny apples. P'tit Ange had always called them fairy apples, and loved to play with them, and it was precious to hear Lucie call out delightedly as she came to the table, "Oh, the dear little apples! Tante Alma, will you show me where they grow?" She did justice to the smelts and the galette and the blueberry jam and cream, and was then so drowsy that she was willing to let Alma take her upstairs and undress her. She was asleep before she was put in bed.

Alma set her house in order with an unaccustomed sense of riches and content; she needed no one's pity now: she would cease to be lonely and eccentric in the eyes of the village; her solitude had come to an end. She foresaw a companionship between herself and her little niece such as had existed between herself and P'tit Ange in the years when she had brought her up and had been both sister and mother to her. Lucie would share her hard-working life—all her old instinct to shoulder the burden and protect the child rose in her—and help to make her less stiff and strange when she met her own kind. She sometimes recognised that her life was making her into a mask of a woman. She could understand the odd looks

of the neighbours, but how could she help it, with the difficulties she had had? When she was Lucie's age P'tit Ange had become her charge and she was already managing the house and toiling from dawn till dark to help her ailing mother. Lucie must be brought up to work of course. Perhaps she would be fond of books and make a scholar who could be trained to be a teacher: that would be a superior life. Sister Marie Incarnation would soon be able to tell if she was clever at her lessons. Alma frowned anxiously as she thought of her small resources and the new claims upon them. Pierre had not suggested contributing anything to Lucie's support, had indeed implied that no help need be looked to from him: "P'tit Ange's illness had cost money, and the funeral was of the best, and masses were to be said, and there was to be a headstone of good quality." It would be hard enough to manage, but of course she could do it.

Anxiety slipped off her as she shaded her tallow candle behind the jug and basin, and knelt cautiously beside the bed to look at the child. Lucie lay on her back, her arms flung outside the bed-clothes, her face slightly turned on the pillow, her eyelashes very black on cheeks that were scarlet with first sleep. The likeness to Pierre was not so noticeable while she slept, but she reminded Alma vaguely of someone else. In her innocence and soft helplessness she seemed an infant. Certainly she did not resemble her mother who had always been so delicately pretty. She was a robust and handsome child, with a boldness and vigour

apparent even in her sleep, clearly derived from another source. . . . How sweet she was, how lovable! Alma found herself pitying P'tit Ange who had had to leave so darling a child. The candle-light made a rainbow on her lashes of the tears shed for such a sorrow.

Lucie sighed and stretched her arms above her head, half opening her eyes. Alma, fearful of waking her to homesickness, hastily withdrew. As she raised her own arms to unpin her hair in front of the cheap mirror on the yellow chest of drawers, she saw that the likeness that had puzzled her in Lucie was to herself! Lucie looked like her father undoubtedly, but she looked much more like her, Alma. The idea dismayed her acutely for some reason. She looked again at the glowing childish face on the pillow and the fancy seemed quite absurd. Her own face, sombre and weather-scarred, its eyes bright, restless, sad, was a mockery of the softness and promise of childhood. She resented having imagined a resemblance as if someone outside had pointed it out. She passionately did not want to be reminded of herself by Lucie. She had died many times since she was ten years old; she could not bear to see herself again as she had been in her different stages, a child, a girl, a young woman. She wanted to forget herself at ten, at twenty, at any age. She wanted to forget her body and its lost hopes and joys.

But not all joys were lost, since Lucie was to be her own, she remembered. They would understand each other all the better if the imagined likeness really existed. As she assured herself of

that, a coldness gathered at her heart, and she blew out her candle, angrily asking herself how it could matter that Lucie resembled her. It should be a happiness. She held the warm, round little body within her arm, that at least was sweet to her.

(5)

“ Why have you no wallpaper, and no pictures ? ” Lucie asked, looking with disfavour at the unstained pine walls of the kitchen adorned only by a black wood temperance cross, and the round clock. She was eating her breakfast with a good appetite, and planning to dominate this aunt who waited on her so eagerly, as she had dominated her feeble little mother. She foresaw herself a person of consequence and the thought was so pleasing that she again deferred the fit of crying and ill-behaviour that was to have led her to return to St. Louis. There was no use crying till she felt unhappy, and she was interested in Tante Alma’s house, and so far was not unhappy. She had never before been the only person of importance in the house, and the experience pleased her. Her father had been first at home, and then the baby, and then her sick mother, and she had only got attention by fighting and pushing for it. Now it seemed as if everything she said was worth attention. The change was agreeable.

“ This is like a poor person’s house,” she pursued. “ At home we have beautiful papers covered with roses and carnations in all the rooms, and pictures in gold frames, and cushions on all the chairs, and carpets. My father is very rich.”

"That must be very fine," Alma said rather wistfully, not because of the carpets and curtains, but because she had never seen P'tit Ange's home.

"But you are poor, I suppose," Lucie said practically. "I wouldn't like that. I mean to be rich when I am big."

Alma smiled at her.

"You must look for the pot of gold next time you see a falling star."

"Where is it? How can I find it?" Lucie asked eagerly, never having heard of the pot of gold.

"Or the treasure hidden in the chimney, or the fortune the little old Man in Grey knows of," Alma said, recalling the old stories that she had once told this child's mother, that Ephrem had told her. "Or the gold pieces in the haunted mill. There is plenty of gold in the world, if one could find it."

Lucie looked at her with a new respect. "Do you know all those stories? Tell me, tell me," she begged.

"You have heard of your Uncle Hyacinthe?" Alma said, wondering as she spoke, if one long dead could become an uncle. "You know you had three uncles—but that was before you were born. They were my brothers, Hercule, Hyacinthe, and Narcisse, and they were fishermen and sailors and they saw many strange things that people on land and in the fields don't see. It was Hyacinthe who saw the old Man in Grey, at the Pilgrims."

"What are the Pilgrims?"

"They are rocks—a great reef in the middle of the river where many boats have been wrecked. Quantities of boats. And bodies have come ashore there, and been buried when anyone landed and

found them. And chests of gold and other treasures in great quantities have been washed up from the wrecks, but no one has ever found those things."

"But why not? Didn't my Uncle Hyacinthe?"

"No—but he saw the guardian of the chests of gold, as plainly as I see you."

"Was he a fairy?"

"I'll tell you how it happened. He was sailing by himself one evening, and he decided to land on the Pilgrims and make a fire, and perhaps sleep the night there. Hyacinthe I am talking about. He was going to fish. When he got his fire going, he looked up and saw another fire close to a big rock a little distance off, and he was very much surprised because he had seen no one on the reef when he landed, and there was no other boat. So he went over to see who it was, and the fire was very small and bright, and there was no one at all watching it, and Hyacinthe knew that it was not a real fire. It was not made of wood like his, but of small rocks and stones burning. He was brave, but it made him a little frightened because it was not natural. Then he remembered about the hidden treasure and the Grey Man who guarded it. And at that very instant a small cloud of smoke rose from the fairy fire and out of it stepped the old Grey Man himself. Hyacinthe said he was about a foot high, and that he did not look wicked or as if he wanted to do him an injury, but just very fierce as if he had a treasure to guard. He did not speak, but he began to throw little stones at Hyacinthe, not to hurt him, but as if to warn him to go away. So he got into his boat

as fast as he could and went off, and when he looked back a minute later he saw both fires go out as if someone had thrown a good handful of water on them."

"And he did not even look for the treasure," Lucie said in deep disappointment. "That seems a pity. Can we go some day to the Pilgrims and look ourselves?"

"You would be frightened if you saw the old Man."

"But we might have a good look round before he comes. What did he look like exactly?"

"About a foot high, dressed all in grey, the colour of smoke, with a grey cap like a Scotch bonnet on his head. Hyacinthe did not see him again though he was often at the Pilgrims."

"Tell me about my Uncle Hyacinthe? Where is he now? I don't like my Uncle Eugene—was he like him?"

"First I think we must change your best dress and go and see the cow and the chickens," Alma said abruptly. "That is your best black dress, Lucie, and you must take care of it."

"I want to wear it," Lucie said firmly. "Aren't you going to take me to see all the people that you know to-day? I must look nice."

"Oh, no. We are not going to see anyone to-day," Alma said, startled.

"But I want to! I like to see people, and they all looked over the fences at me," Lucie frowned and spoke in a sullen voice. "I'm not going to stay here alone all day."

Alma was shocked at the change in her pretty

face and troubled by the complaint in her voice, but she had a sudden inspiration.

“Of course you are not going to be alone at all, dear Lucie. But remember that we are in deep mourning just now. We cannot be seen much, or pay visits. Some friends may come to see you here, and we will go to the convent in a few days to see about beginning school. You will like Sister Marie-Incarnation.”

“Anyhow I mean to wear this dress all day,” Lucie said pouting. “And you will have to tell me stories whenever I ask you. My mother is dead.”

“Yes, I know, my little treasure,” Alma kissed her. “Come now and we will feed the chickens.”

“I will wear my black so that people will know that I am in mourning,” Lucie said, beginning to enjoy herself again. “And as soon as we can, let us go and call on everybody with children for me to play with. I will tell them about St. Louis. They won’t know much, I suppose.”

“They will tell you about Canadian things and the country,” Alma suggested, feeling as if a crisis had been averted, but perturbed at the thought of the child in her best clothes about the house and fields. It was almost sacrilegious in her eyes—as in those of all the village women—to wear black except to church. The colour had a peculiar dignity, in the village estimation, was considered the “richest” thing one could appear in. But she said no more at the moment, and Lucie, restored to smiles, danced beside her to the barn.

CHAPTER FIFTH

(1)

ON Sunday Lucie went to church and was delighted with the interest she aroused as she entered and knelt devoutly beside Alma, and with the notice bestowed on her in the churchyard after mass. Old friends with whom the man-woman had not exchanged a word for years now came up very civilly. Father Simon himself, hurrying into the Presbytery for his breakfast, paused to pat Lucie on the head and bid her be a good little girl and a consolation to her aunt. Mme. Pradet, who was so grandly dressed in maroon satin that Lucie picked her out during the sermon as a rich person, came over and offered kindly enough to forget her difference with Alma.

“Let us be friends again, Alma. I bear you no ill-will for harsh words spoken, and P’tit Ange, God knows, was like a daughter to me long ago,” she said, rather exaggerating her affection for her goddaughter as she stood holding Lucie’s little hand.

“I am quite willing,” Alma replied gruffly. “I am too busy to think of quarrels, and I had already forgotten it.”

“Your mother was my godchild,” Mme. Pradet told Lucie, her tight satin bodice heaving a little

with emotion. "I loved her very much and her death has been a terrible grief to me."

She was as complacent and sleek as a pouter pigeon, with no sign of grief on her smooth, florid face. She rustled and smelt of scent. Lucie, much impressed, instantly determined to rustle and smell of scent when she was big enough.

Alma received the friendly gestures of the neighbours—which she knew to be prompted by curiosity for the most part—with her aloof, almost threatening air, and answered harshly enough when they asked Lucie's name and age, and how P'tit Ange Charette had died. To the last question she replied forbiddingly, a faint, bitter smile on her lips: "It was the will of God more than any illness," and this, though unsatisfactory, had to content them. There was no hope of getting the particulars they relished (and readily imparted to each other) from the man-woman, an unnatural creature! How they pitied that unlucky niece! But the child seemed a clever little creature, inclined to be frank and talkative. She piped up in answer to Mme. Gravel's further inquiries, "My mother had a fever, and she wasted away until she was as thin as a mouse in a trap." She had heard Marie Bellechasse say this, and had no thought of the pain it gave her aunt to hear it repeated. Alma snatched at her hand to lead her away.

"You must come and play with my little ones," Mme. Gravel purred, with a malicious look at Alma, who had not known her as a girl. She came of a poor shiftless family, not in good repute. She had married into better circumstances, but

was disliked in the village because she was a spiteful woman full of small mean ways. A thin woman with dark eyes that were badly crossed, she had faithfully transmitted the defect to her large brood. Lucie looked at the group of squinting boys and girls with dislike, but murmured a shy thank you for the invitation. She had her eye on the two flaxen-haired fat little Ravary girls, startlingly dressed in red and green plaid, as probable play-fellows. They looked docile and appeared to be shyly admiring the young stranger's black hat; their round, blue gaze flattered her. She saw herself ordering them about, willing slaves, smiled at them and asked their names. Toinette and Emma were overcome with blushes as they gave the information.

Alma, when she saw how many people were interested in Lucie, remembered that the Leblés had once held a fine position in the village. Long ago, when she and the boys had driven to church every Sunday with Ephrem and Zélie in a fine closed carriage, there had been much exchange of friendly greetings after mass; they had often taken Sunday dinner with a neighbour, or had had a big party of friends at their own house. How far she had fallen from the former consideration of the family! She felt cold and unfriendly to everyone, unwilling at heart to share Lucie in any way. But she must not be selfish for the child's sake. Lucie chattered happily all the way home.

Her resolution not to keep Lucie too much to herself failed her the next Sunday; she roused the child to go to early mass. Lucie's indignation

vented itself in sulky tears. Alma spoke sharply to her : Lucie knew very well that she must go to mass on Sundays, and it was not convenient to go to late mass except very occasionally. She did not say that she was determined to keep her away from other children as much as possible, but she meant it. She who had nothing else wanted all the child's affection, and felt fiercely jealous that Lucie had shown such readiness to make friends with anyone who spoke to her. Lucie sulked and dawdled all the way to church, but inwardly she was plotting to get the better of her aunt.

Next day, immediately after breakfast, she disappeared. Alma was down in the barn, and Lucie had been left to do various small duties in the way of dusting and sweeping in the house. Alma, seeing that she was inclined to be lazy, was anxious to give her habits of work, and was not indulgent to her as she had been to P'tit Ange. When Lucie was slow and rude Alma found herself getting impatient. Moreover, to her surprise, the constant presence of the child harassed her much as she rejoiced to have her. It could hardly be otherwise to one long accustomed to complete solitude, but it shamed Alma. She was so used to her own way that she could not submit to all the caprices of a child. After the first week Lucie discovered that Alma's hand could shake her by the shoulder in a firm and angry fashion that made her flame with resentment. Remorse filled Alma instantly.

“ There, my treasure, I am sorry. But you must

be proud about your work, and speak politely when I show you how to do it. But I do not want to scold you, Lucie. I love you too much."

"Then next time don't shake me!"

But next time—which came promptly—Lucie would behave worse, and Alma longed to beat her. Instead she would send her off to play and do the task herself and, the time after, shake her again.

(2)

She called "Lucie" in vain through the house, looking even into Ephrem's closed and darkened room for her. When she had made the tour of all the likely places where she might hide, an unreasonable fear took hold of her. Could she have run down the cliff to the beach? She might easily come to harm there. She went to the beach path, and, meeting Joe Bernard coming up, she asked him if he had seen sign of the child. Joe had not seen her, and said in a practical, hearty way, "She's off to find someone of her own age to play with. You can't keep children from children. Look in the village, and you'll find her with the others."

She went back to the house, saw her distraught face in the kitchen glass, and felt that it condemned her as unfit to take care of Lucie. She must not let herself suffer so intensely over every small indication that she was not enough for the child. It was only natural that she should play with other children. But her heart was beating as if she had run a race, and she wished that Lucie had

been a dependant, clinging child, turning always to her. Joe Bernard had somehow assured her of the truth of his surmise: Lucie was in no danger, she was looking for amusement. Let her stay away. Alma did not go to look for her, but she could not take up any work. She sat in the kitchen and stirred no hand to tidy it, or to prepare dinner.

At twelve o'clock Lucie had not come in; she, no doubt, had stayed to dinner with her new found friends, whoever they were. Alma waited, thinking of the emptiness of the house. It had filled and emptied through the years, filled and emptied, always leaving her behind to be aware of the silence and the blankness.

At five Lucie returned, flushed and triumphant but a little scared. She began volubly to explain that she had just gone a little way down the road, and had met some children who asked her to stay and play; Paul and Alice Gravel; and afterwards Toinette and Emma came too. Lucie loved them and had gone home to dinner with them. Their Papa and Mamma knew Tante Alma, and had been at her own mother's wedding, and she didn't know how late it was, and was Tante Alma angry with her?

No, Alma was not angry. She made one of her stiff motions to embrace the child. Lucie submitted with less impatience than usual, and laid a bright cheek against her arm, almost caressingly. Bitterness and jealousy vanished in her presence; when she began to scold and pretend that the positions of aunt and niece were reversed,

and that she had expected to come home and find a tidy house, and tea ready, Alma laughed and the tension relaxed.

“ You are my little niece Alma, and I am your Tante Lucie. I am very cross because the dishes aren't washed since this morning, and the kettle is not even filled ! Be quick, you naughty child,” Lucie ordered, and they played at that game all the evening.

But next day, planning a second escape, she found every way barred. She was quick-witted and made no protest at the many small duties Alma found for her to do about the house. She submitted without sulking, and as her aunt was constantly at hand to tell her stories—which she loved—she worked very well. Early in the afternoon Alma announced that they were going out for a walk, and she would buy Lucie an Indian basket to keep her work in. This was not uninteresting, but the child was at first disconcerted not to find herself going to the village shop : she had hoped to explain to Toinette and Emma why she had been obliged to break her engagement to play with them that morning. But the walk along the beach was exciting. She shook off care and skipped along blithely, asking endless questions ; enjoyed the sea and the sand, and the fact that she was wearing what she considered her grand clothes ; Tante Alma was very kind to her.

Alma was triumphant to see that she could make the child happy ; if she could devote every minute to amusing her, Lucie would want no one else. But her work prevented that. Anyhow she

believed that Lucie was getting fond of her. She wanted to show her, all glowing, to Josephine the young Indian woman who had once been kind to herself. Alma had made a little pink flannel coat for Josephine's baby, sewing it laboriously with unaccustomed fingers, but the real object of her visit was neither to buy a basket nor to present the coat, but to show off Lucie. The village had had the chance of seeing her at church, but the Indians, unless they happened to be tramping along the high road selling their wares, were likely to miss this privilege.

Lucie shrank close to her aunt, disliking the ragged group of black-eyed children who swarmed round them as they approached the Indian huts; Alma held her hand firmly and marched her through with a proud look.

Josephine squatted inside the doorway of the windowless little room, plaiting sweet hay as if she had never moved since the day Alma had taken refuge with her. The baby, unstrapped from its board, was kicking, half-naked, on a blanket beside her. The mother gravely looked up at Alma, while Lucie tugged her hand to keep her from entering.

"I don't want to go in and see those dirty people," she whimpered.

"Do not speak like that," Alma said severely, knowing that Lucie was not afraid but only behaving badly. She drew her forward and made her repeat her name to the Indian woman. Lucie, always volatile and responsive, began to smile when Josephine smiled and praised her.

"You are happy to-day," the Indian said shrewdly, looking at Alma. "No wonder, with such a beautiful child."

"For the baby," Alma said, shyly presenting the jacket, and kneeling to touch the baby's brown knees. "Look, Lucie, how pretty he is."

"I don't like babies," Lucie said carelessly. When the mother, aided by Alma, delightedly tried the pink coat on the infant, she peeped about the dark interior, and inspected the baskets and plaits of hay hanging on the walls.

"Is it here we buy my basket?" she whispered, returning to Alma's side. "Oh, I see what I want—that big, red one. Red is my favourite colour. Can I have that one? I want it."

"We'll see," Alma said, pleased with Josephine's exclamations of satisfaction with her infant's appearance in his new finery. Having admired him ardently, although the jacket was much too big for him, she took it off and began to swaddle him closely into the stiff, oblong package in which he passed most of his days. The process fascinated Lucie who watched, with the steady stare of childhood, the solemn infant.

"Now can I have that basket?" she demanded, when the baby was fastened, out of harm's way, by a leather thong to the wall. She pointed to a large round basket made of scarlet straw worked with sweet hay, that Alma knew to be expensive.

"That is too dear, I am afraid," she said, hesitating.

"That is the one I want. You must give me that one," Lucie declared wilfully, pouting.

She carried it home in triumph, although it cost much more than Alma was prepared to spend. Josephine would have given it to her out of gratitude, but she would not allow that. With some misgiving she put down the sum she could afford—less she suspected, than the cost of the basket—and let Lucie take the coveted thing.

The Indian woman walked a few steps along the sand with them, her timid air disappearing, a smile of affection and equality in her eyes when she looked at this village woman who had come to see her as an act of simple friendliness.

“Your own child will not resemble you more,” she said stroking Lucie’s bright hair, and flattering Alma by the implication of her words.

Alma answered gruffly, “She is all I will ever have.”

“You are good. You are not proud.” Josephine touched her sleeve as if she caressed her, remembering that in the village she and her tribe were despised. “You are good to my little baby.”

“Your little baby is lovely, like a doll, he is so small and pretty,” Lucie struck in amiably, good-humoured because she had got the scarlet basket. Kissing her hand airily to Josephine, she danced away across the beach.

Alma was gratified almost to tears. To Lucie in such a mood, she would have given two red baskets.

(3)

The child was off again next day; she wished to show her new possession to her friends in the village. They opened round eyes and said, “Your

Aunt Lebel isn't so bad to you." When Alma went after her and brought her back mildly scolding her, she sulked. Next time she asked permission to go, and was away all the afternoon.

Alma, with some bitterness, began to realise that she could not keep a child so headstrong and so sociable from making friends of her own age. She quickly found that although she could impose her will upon her by force or threat of punishment, the instant she tried persuasion and petting Lucie took advantage of her. The love and close companionship she had hoped for was, at the end of two months, an uncaptured dream. Lucie, almost unconsciously, held her off, as if she had some hostility towards her. Alma felt it again and again. It embittered her and made her ways and voice seem harsh when she was full of love ; but she never thought that it could be permanent, an issue between them that must grow. It always seemed an accident of the moment, a temporary misunderstanding that would pass. It was long before she realised the conflict of will and sympathy, not quite the fault of either, that prevented the happiness she had expected. She was not given to introspection : it puzzled her to find herself so often at variance with one she loved and longed to make happy. Occasional good times made up for disputes and tears. Lucie would " grow out of it " she used to promise herself vaguely, after a scene that left her defeated and dismayed.

Work went on as usual—indeed there was more of it since there was Lucie to provide for. Alma took in washing for the English visitors that

summer, a thing she had never done before. She sold a little milk as well, carefully putting aside the small sums she made. In the evenings she taught Lucie to make wool rugs in bright colours that pleased her; and gay with designs of tulips and cocks and hens and baskets of flowers. They had a ready sale to the English visitors, who gave good prices. She also taught the child songs that Ephrem used to sing to P'tit Ange. When it was a question of a song or a story Lucie was attentive and eager and quick to learn. She put her doll to bed with the old, childish rhyme taught her by Toinette—Alma could recall P'tit Ange crooning in the same fashion :

“ Sainte Marguerite
 Veillez ma petite ;
 Endormez ma petite enfant,
 Jusqu' à l'âge de quinze ans :
 Quand elle aura quinze ans passé,
 Il faudra la marier,
 Avec un petit bonhomme
 Qui viendra de Rome ! ”

Then she would sing gaily :

“ J'ai tant d'enfants à marier . . .
 Grand Dieu, je n'sais comment
 Pouvoir en marier tant ! ”

That always made her laugh. She had a loud, tuneful voice and liked to use it. She commanded Alma to sing the songs she fancied over and over till she had learnt the words and the air. Alma, who had not lifted her own voice for years, was shocked to find it husky and strained. Once she had sung as loudly and easily as Lucie—in that

as in her looks the child resembled her—and had matched her three brothers in her knowledge of songs and catches. It had not struck her that her voice would change to something so sad and tuneless. But Lucie commanded—and she sang, and low and broken as her voice was she still remembered the verses and the rhythm. For a long time Lucie would not go to sleep unless her favourite air of the moment was repeated over and over till she was too drowsy to demand its repetition. For a time it was the endless song of the Wandering Jew, then it was “Par derrière chez ma tante, Y-a-t-un pommier doux,” and then it was “Le premier jour de mai que barrai-je à ma mie ?”

“ Une perdriole
 Qui vient, qui va, qui vole,
 Une perdriole qui vole dans ces bois.”

She could soon correct her aunt if she confused any of the offerings to be made on the different days of the month of May.

“ Neuf chevaux avec leurs selles,
 Huit moutons avec leur laine,
 Sept vaches à lait,
 Six chiens courants,
 Cinq lapins grattant la terre,
 Quatre canards volant en l’air,
 Trois rats des bois,
 Deux tourterelles,
 Une perdriole
 Qui vient, qui va, qui vole,
 Une perdriole
 Qui vole dans ces bois.”

Alma’s throat ached with singing it before her

tyrant fell asleep, but those were happy hours when the child wanted her and was gay and content.

(4)

The convent, set well back in a pleasant, prim garden and screened from the road by a row of aspens, was a long, two-storied white house with green shutters, and a green door set off by a brass bell and knocker. The scraper, painted an immaculate white, was certainly not meant for use. Only formal visitors and the Curé opened the front gate and came up the verandah steps, and they took care that their feet were fit to tread the paint without marking it. Naturally they never required to use the scraper. The calm of the front garden was seldom broken. The school children entered and left by the back way ; so as a rule did their mothers when business, connected with their offspring, took them to see the Sisters. But Alma had no thought of going round to the back the day she brought Lucie to see Sister Marie-Incarnation, one afternoon of early September. She was too hot in her black woollen dress after her long walk. But Lucie, in her Sunday dress and hat, was as fresh as when they had started, and was all eagerness for the novelty of seeing what the nuns and school would be like.

“ It is a very grand garden. The nuns must be rich,” she said, appreciatively wrinkling up her nose to the smell of asters and nasturtiums. She thought enviously of the honey in the white beehives set among the rows of scarlet runner beans and immense sunflowers.

“ Oh, apples, Tante Alma ! Look ! ”

The convent orchard, carefully pruned and tended (and never robbed) was famous. This year the harvest was heavy. The boughs, laden with the hard, dark red “ Fameuse ” apples grown from seed imported generations before from Normandy, hung within easy reach of a short arm. Lucie’s quick eyes looked in vain for a windfall—Sister Peter-Joseph’s eyes were sharp, and she collected the fallen fruit three times a day—and she stretched out her hand to a tempting rosy apple.

“ Oh, can I, can I pick just one ? ” she entreated.

“ Not *one*,” Alma said sternly, scandalised.

Sister Marie-Incarnation had sent word that she wished to examine Lucie, who was to begin lessons at the convent on the following Monday. Alma hoped that she would be found advanced enough to enter the nun’s own class. She wanted Marie-Incarnation to have charge of Lucie. The nun—when she was Albertine Trudel—had been a schoolmate at the same convent with Alma. Though Alma did nothing to keep it up, they still retained an affection for each other. Marie-Incarnation never failed to send a long and beautifully-written letter of consolation to Alma when she was in trouble. Although her phrases were taken from a book, the feeling that prompted her to write was not wholly formal nor religious. She had been very fond of Alma ; affection at its height when she took the veil, it continued to exist. Alma was aware of it, and had a request to make to the cheerful-looking, black-eyed little nun who had

been Albertine to her once. A hope that she would influence Lucie to "like her"—Alma put it thus childishly—made up a large part of her eagerness to place Lucie in her hands. All the village influence seemed to be the other way.

Lucie could almost see her face in the varnished floor of the parlour. The stiffly-starched curtains of coarse white lace would, she thought, make entrancing petticoats. But, apart from the luxury of cleanliness, there was no reflection of the "richness" of the garden in the convent itself. She had hoped for plush chairs, but a row of wooden ones, painted an economical black, confronted her. With a sigh she wriggled uncomfortably up on to one of them.

"I never wish to be a nun," she said positively. "I shall take care to marry a rich man and have red velvet chairs in my parlour. But the nuns ought to have *one* nice chair for the Mother Superior."

"You would not be allowed to sit on it," Alma said, smiling at her.

"The nuns—and even the Mother Superior herself—have better things to think of, let us hope, than velvet chairs." Sister Marie-Incarnation spoke in a prim, half-sententious, half-amused voice, appearing suddenly in her grey and black habit. She was a plump, merry-looking little woman with a retreating chin, chubby red cheeks almost hiding her comic snub nose. Alma remembered that she had had the frizziest black hair imaginable, curly as a nigger's wool. It must have been the greatest relief to cut it all off, when

she became a nun. In spite of her easy-going air she was the severest mistress in the school, as unruly children speedily discovered, often to their great surprise.

Excited at seeing her again, she kissed Alma, and took Lucie's face between her hands to look at her critically.

"You yourself, Alma!" she exclaimed with feeling. "She might be your own."

"I resemble my papa," Lucie said indignantly, flashing a hostile look at Alma, and her voice, at least, was the impudent voice of Pierre. It was the first time she had been told of the likeness which her aunt had seen the first night, and she resented it as Alma had resented it. The nun gave her a curious look and Lucie drew back, abashed by the expression in her small twinkling eyes.

"You were always so independent and so lively," Marie-Incarnation continued, thinking back to her school days with the gaunt woman in black, and now looking at her with tenderness.

Presently she took Lucie away to ask her a few questions about lessons and she dismissed her into the garden before returning to the parlour.

"She's a clever child—well advanced," she announced with satisfaction. "I'll have her in my class certainly. But she has been spoilt a little—I suppose being P'tit Ange's first. You mustn't spoil her, Alma."

"I want you to make her to like me," Alma said, in childish desperation. "She is so hard sometimes that I feel she cannot care at all. I have been alone, without P'tit Ange for so long, that I am

awkward with children, but I try to make her happy. Yet there are half a dozen people she will run to sooner than to me. Berthe Pradet, Octave's wife, Mme. Gravel even."

"Children are like that," Marie-Incarnation said wisely. "Do not let her see that it matters too much. When she is older she will see who is her best friend."

She praised Lucie's looks and intelligence. Alma smiled proudly, but was preoccupied. She spoke again hesitatingly, feeling for words to express something that was very obscure to herself.

"One thing troubles me a little, Albertine," she said, unconsciously using the old name. "When P'tit Ange first knew about having a baby—Lucie—she was a little strange with me. Oh, it was nothing! She was troubled at going away, and not very well. But she was different and I felt as if she disliked me, almost. I used to see it in her face, and sometimes I think I see that look in Lucie's face—as if she got it from her mother before she was born. But that was just a passing thing, and all those other years P'tit Ange never looked at me like that." Alma stopped, overcome by the sharpness of that memory. "Lucie couldn't——"

"Lucie couldn't get anything but love for you from her mother—that is sure enough," Marie-Incarnation said with conviction. "And you mustn't get fancies, Alma. It's not right. That's the most foolish idea I ever heard. As if we got our likes and dislikes from other people before we were born! Such a thing is impossible. And you've imagined it about P'tit Ange. Women get

fancies at such times, but you were in the place of her mother and she always thought the world of you. What did she call her first-born but after you—Lucie-Alma?" She drew Alma's hand in hers within her capacious sleeve, and spoke in a low voice.

"And otherwise you are happier? It is many years now, and our prayers must have helped their poor souls."

She alone—now that Ephrem was gone—knew that Alma had had years of torment because her three brothers had died, to all human knowledge, unprepared; had had masses said weekly at the convent for the repose of their souls. She had known the boys well, often remembered them before the altar, especially Hyacinthe, whose face she recalled even now, brown and laughing, his gay eyes shining into hers. He had kissed her once, and no other man had ever done that. Often from her cloister, she saw the two figures, his and hers, as two children in another world.

"I feel more content. God is good," Alma said mechanically. "But sometimes I hear their voices as I used to do, as if they still called for help. It is Hyacinthe most—he was so much to us all, and so fond of P'tit Ange. His voice was the one we missed most in the house."

"There is no doubt they need our help always. We must pray," Marie-Incarnation said, her little apple-face altered by an expression of gravity rare to it. "Lucie too—she is old enough, and the prayers of the innocent are gracious. But you must not be sad, Alma. You have the child—

and she ought to be your own, she is so miraculously like you."

"She must not be like me in any way but looks," Alma said quickly. She rose to go, remembering Lucie's impatience.

Sister Marie-Incarnation took them round the garden, breaking off a few asters for Alma and, at the last moment, when Lucie's longing eyes almost bored through her, putting a big red apple into her eager hands.

"That's for being Alma Lebel's little niece," she said, laughing. "None of my scholars get apples—only the birch." She kissed the child and added, "Eight o'clock on Monday morning."

(5)

"Tante Alma why do they call you the man-woman?"

"Do they call me that?"

"Yes. Why do they?"

"Because they have idle tongues that you shouldn't listen to."

"I think it is because you are so strong—like a man," Lucie insinuated, anxious to report all that she heard but not wishing to anger Alma, whose cheek showed a dark red.

"Because I am left alone to do a man's work that few other women in this village could do," Alma commented grimly.

She was sorting out and tearing up rags for a carpet; Lucie was laboriously hooking wool in and out of an oblong piece of coarse canvas destined in the course of time to be a violent pink and orange rug.

School was an excitement of which Lucie did not tire. She was always ready for breakfast soon after half-past six, and away by seven. Her dinner she had at the convent. She was dismissed at three o'clock and should have been home by four, were it not irresistible to loiter and play. Consequently, except on Sunday and, possibly, on the Thursday half holiday, Alma seldom saw her between breakfast and supper. After supper she made her work at her woollen rug and, sometimes, for a change, she taught her to weave and spin. But Lucie found these accomplishments tiresome and learnt unwillingly enough.

She plunged her hook into her work while she cut off a bunch of orange wool.

"They say, too, that you hate men, perhaps because you resemble one. They ask if I am afraid of you."

"They, they! Who are 'they'?" Alma asked impatiently.

"At school."

"And is there nothing to do at school but chatter—and about me?"

"Oh, yes," Lucie replied ingenuously. "About other people too, but everyone is a little afraid of you, Tante Alma."

"Yes?"

"Yes. Because you live alone and know the Indians."

"What Indians?"

"You took me to see them the day we got my lovely red basket, and another day when the baby was sick. And there's that old man with

the fiddle—Tancredi. You talk to him in the fields.”

“Everyone knows Tancredi.” Alma, though she spoke quietly, was beginning to feel angry.

“But no one goes to see those dirty old Indians on the beach except you. Mme. Gravel says it isn’t right to take me there. Mme. Gravel says everyone knows that Indians aren’t respectable.”

Alma, in a sudden rage, shook the child violently by the shoulder in the way Lucie hated.

“Don’t tell me what evil-tongued people like the Gravel woman say to you! And don’t listen to them. You’ll come to no harm with me, and they know that well enough, for all their wicked minds.”

“Oh, you hurt me. I’ll tell Mme. Gravel that you beat me,” Lucie shrieked.

“That isn’t true.”

“It is true. You hurt my arm. They call you ‘the old Aunt Lebel’ in the village and they make fun of you,” Lucie cried, sobbing with temper. “You forbid me to play. You scold me. I wish I didn’t live with you!”

Alma’s heart sank. She felt that she deserved this condemnation, since Lucie could pronounce it.

“Do you say that to me, Lucie?”

“I didn’t ask to come here. I didn’t ask for my mother to die,” Lucie stormed, her eyes now raining tears. “I want to go home to St. Louis. I hate you.”

“Who taught you to say a thing like that—Mme. Gravel again?” Alma asked cuttingly.

Lucie frightened by her tense, hard face, stole

an ashamed look at her. She did not hate Tante Alma—at times she liked her—but she was obstinate and headstrong and did not wish to take back her angry words. She accepted all that Alma gave as no more than her right, but, in her heart, she knew that she would not have had a tenth part of such solicitude if she had remained at home with her father and brothers, dependent on the casual, careless goodwill of Marie Bellechasse for comfort. Alma's rigid look almost frightened her into a whimpering expression of regret, but, as she struggled with herself, it was Alma who yielded. Her face began to work grotesquely. She knelt heavily on the floor beside the child, putting her arms round her.

"I am sorry when I scold you," she murmured humbly in a smothered voice. "You must know how much I love you, for your mother's sake and your own."

Lucie instantly hardened. She hated caresses, except the flattering ones of strangers; and if Tante Alma had been in the wrong, she, Lucie, had been in the right. She accepted Alma's kiss ungraciously, let her sobs die away, and, presently, was munching a slice of bread and butter with maple sugar scraped on it, with a victorious, almost a virtuous feeling.

"Tell about old Mother Prime," she said after a pause, anxious to leave the disagreeable topic.

"I am tired to-night," Alma said, her heart still leaden.

"Oh, please! Did she really see a goblin in the stable plaiting her horse's mane? Did she think

it was a little cat ? ” Lucie begged, leaning against her with flattering eagerness for a story that she knew perfectly.

“ Yes. A black kitten she thought it was.”

“ Tell me, tell me ! ”

Alma, with a sense of reprieve, of another chance to conquer the child’s affection, told the story in her bald, slow fashion.

“ I knew Mother Prime well. It was one evening she was going to fetch some wood for the stove, and passing the stable she heard a strange sound inside. She couldn’t make it out. She opened the door and saw nothing except her old mare with her mane all plaited up tight, looking restless, but no one was there with her.”

“ So what did she do ? ”

“ She waited outside, and soon she opened the door quite suddenly again. Something like a black kitten jumped off the mare’s back and flew past her. And this time Mother Prime saw that the tail of the animal was tightly plaited up too. It must have been an imp. She heard him laugh outside the stable door as she unplaited the mane and tail.”

“ Did you ever see a stable imp ? ”

“ Not exactly, but once our chestnut horse was fairy-ridden. He was tired out in the stable one morning, trembling all over, with his mane plaited tight in a dozen little braids. But my father knew a cure—your grandfather I mean. He hung a little bucket of cinders over the stable door, and when the goblin came riding out the next night, he knocked it down. He had to dismount and

pick up every cinder and put it back in the bucket. That cured him of riding Rufine."

"Why did it?"

"I can't say why, but it is always so, my father used to say. Come, now it is time for bed."

Unwilling to talk longer, she began to put away her work, although it was earlier than usual. Lucie went readily, anxious that it should be morning again, and time for school. She had already forgotten the scene that had passed. The thought of it kept Alma awake, a medley of troubled and confused images in her mind.

(6)

Another day Lucie returned with a secretive face, and throughout supper sat staring at Alma full of suppressed excitement.

"What is it now, my treasure?" Alma asked good-humouredly. "You could eat another piece of galette, I am sure? Try a small piece. And see the red maple leaves I have found for you to varnish. The very last on the tree down by the beach path."

"What is in that room there?" Lucie asked bluntly, pointing at the door that led from the kitchen into Ephrem's room.

"What should be in it? You have seen that room before now. It was your grandfather's room as you know very well."

"Yes, but—is this house haunted, Tante Alma?"

"Haunted? Only by you and by me, that I know of," Alma said drily. "Who has been telling tales now? Not Sister Marie-Incarnation."

“ No.”

“ Who then ? ”

“ Everybody thinks this house is haunted. Is it true,” she hesitated, “ that my grandfather made his own coffin, and kept it in the barn for all the world to see ? ”

“ All the world was not encouraged to come and see it. Yes, that is true,” Alma said.

“ Is it in this house now—in that room ? ” Lucie demanded, round-eyed.

“ Yes.” Alma was much troubled, remembering P’tit Ange’s horror of it as a child and as a girl. “ It was blessed and ready once, and then—when it was—it was not used—it was left in that empty room. It cannot hurt you, my darling. The curé himself blessed it.” She spoke with the greatest gentleness and affection, looking anxiously at the child.

“ I want to see it,” Lucie said unexpectedly.

Alma, carrying a lamp in her hand, took her in presently, Lucie firmly holding her skirt. As she set the lamp on the shelf by Ephrem’s bed Alma, with an exclamation of pleasure, discovered two of the wooden birds that he had been so fond of carving for P’tit Ange, and gave them to Lucie. They were clever and lifelike with outstretched wings.

“ That’s a present for you from your grandpapa. He often carved birds ‘ for the babies.’ That was you and the little boys—you were the first of them.”

Lucie held them as if they burnt her fingers.

“ Is that the coffin ? Is that what a coffin is

like ? ” she asked, awed a little. “ I did not see the one for my mamma, I was sick and was sent away. Uncover it—let me see *in*, Tante Alma.”

Alma knelt and removed the blue cloth. The coffin was a familiar piece of furniture to her now. Once a year she dusted it carefully, touching the crucifix with reverence and affection. The night she had obeyed Ephrem’s summons to fetch it into the house, she had lost all feeling of fear that used to stir her when it stood upright in the barn. But she feared to see Lucie distressed as P’tit Ange had been distressed.

“ It is beautifully carved, and it is a holy object. It can do us no harm,” she repeated.

“ Open the cover,” Lucie begged, in an excited whisper. When Alma raised the lid she gazed in curiously.

“ Nothing ! ” she exclaimed, with a long sigh of relief. She let the wooden birds fall from her hand into the coffin.

“ I don’t want a present from someone who is dead,” she cried shrilly. “ Shut it quick and come away, Tante Alma.”

CHAPTER SIXTH

(1)

THE man with the dancing bear was in the village. He had been reported in the neighbourhood for two or three days past, and now here he was, just the same as in former summers, a small, foreign figure, slightly distrusted by the older people but adored by the children who ran at his heels, keeping at a respectful distance from the bear. The bear-tamer appeared from nowhere and trudged through a score of French Canadian villages about the same time every year, disappearing with the cold weather as if the earth had swallowed him up. It was not always the same man, but it was always the same bear, as far as one could tell, rather thin beneath his shaggy hide, that plodded behind him in the dust, drooping wearily in the heat. The children did not think the bear was thin or miserable ; to them he was at once a dangerous monster and a funny sight. They laughed and applauded when, at his master's command, he went through his clumsy antics ; laughing more loudly when he had to be prompted with a wooden stave, spiked at the end.

They knew the bear man's rhyme by heart ; he sang it over and over while the beast revolved round and round in a clumsy waltz :

“ Les bonbons sont pour les garçons,
Les pastilles sont pour les jeunes filles.”

It was a marvellous performance, and when the bear opened his great arms and received his master into an embrace, the small children shuddered behind their mothers' skirts and sometimes wept.

When she arrived in Mme. Dufour's kitchen to help Lucie wash the dishes, Alice Gravel brought the news that the man and the bear were in front of Pradet's shop. Alice was panting with excitement. Her eyes seemed to squint more than ever as she related that a crowd had already gathered to see the performance.

“ But he'll do it all over again here, he always does, for the English,” she said breathlessly. “ Be quick, Lucie, and we'll go to the door when he comes. He is young this year, and very handsome. You needn't laugh at me. Must a bear-tamer always be old and ugly ? ”

“ You find every man handsome this year, Alice,” Lucie scoffed.

Mme. Dufour kept the largest boarding-house in the village. Lucie and Alice were engaged for the summer to wait at table and do the housework. Lucie was sixteen and had left the convent. It had been a long fight before she had been allowed to take the place ; only the real need of the dollar a week that she earned had finally prevailed with Alma. Lucie needed shoes and a coat. Alma went about like a scarecrow, afraid to spend a penny on herself. At the end of the summer Lucie argued, with twelve or fifteen dollars, and probably presents from the English ladies into

the bargain, things would be very different ; they could both have some new, warm clothes for the winter.

“ You’ll keep your money for yourself,” Alma said ungraciously. “ I haven’t yet to ask the Dufours to dress me ! ”

Lucie shrugged her shoulders and got her own way as she usually did. She began work with enthusiasm, longing for excitement, but at the end of some weeks she was a little disappointed in the results of her venture. Mme. Dufour knew how to get every ounce of work out of her girls, and the English ladies proved to be thrifty, not to say stingy in their gifts. Lucie scrubbed and rubbed, washed and waited, set the tables three times a day, ran messages, carried hot water up to bedrooms—oh, how much hot water English ladies required to wash with, although they dipped themselves every day in the sea as well—and found herself tired and sulky at night when she went home. Still, it was better than working all the time with Alma ; she got some fun out of it ; and was saving her dollar a week. Alice Gravel was fun too, full of all sorts of mysterious talk that, though Lucie only half understood it, thrilled her. Alice was a year older ; her head was full of young men and marriage ; she was constantly in wild excitement about her admirers, who, however, had never declared themselves openly. Alice was singularly unattractive, with her badly crossed eyes and slovenly ways ; but Lucie thought she knew a great deal that was amusing, and she bore no ill-will when Lucie made fun of her.

Midday dinner was soon over and the girls were alone in the kitchen, with the afternoon before them, when the sound of the bear-man's brass horn was heard. Soon he came into sight, and halted on a triangular piece of green opposite Dufour's. The visitors who were not sleeping after their dinner, or on the beach, crowded out on to the verandah to see the show. The following of small boys and girls ranged themselves on the fences, or lay about on the grass to witness the enchanting performance for the third time that day.

Other summers the bear had claimed Lucie's attention; she, too, had hung breathless over the sad little display, which had seemed glorious and exciting. But this time, prompted by Alice, she had eyes only for the bear's master. She saw him as a romantic figure in his blue blouse and velvet trousers—unlike anything worn by the men she knew. When he took off his battered old felt hat and bowed and smiled ingratiatingly, she saw that he was a young man, as Alice had said, with thick, curly black hair, large black eyes and very white teeth. She clutched Alice and squirmed appreciation of his beauty. Since Mme. Dufour was away for the afternoon, and there was no fear of a reprimand, both girls were soon trying to attract his attention by little shrieks, and bursts of admiration.

He threw them a smile, and then gravely went through the performance. He commanded the bear to shoulder arms and march like a soldier; he asked it what its father and mother were doing in the mountains, and the bear sat up and growled

menacingly at him. He pretended to shoot it dead, and the bear rolled over and lay still until the word to rise was given. Lastly, he sang his monotonous little rhyme over and over, and the bear waltzed clumsily round and round, and finally embraced him. Lucie shrieked aloud at this, and dropped the yellow bowl she was holding. It broke to pieces on the steps.

The bear man lingered, asked for a drink of water, and then for a pan of water for his bear. While Alice, speechless with excitement, ran to get it, he whispered to Lucie in his queer, guttural French, "Come along the road and watch the performance once more, Mademoiselle. You are so beautiful."

Lucie reddened and tossed her head, but it struck her that it would be a pleasant and daring thing to do. She whispered to Alice; they clung to each other, giggling and wondering if they dared steal an hour. Mme. Dufour need never know; at least, when she did find out, they would have had their amusement.

"I'll get one scolding for breaking the bowl, so I may as well get two," Lucie declared recklessly, excited by the man's smiling black eyes. He moved off, turning back to look at them invitingly once or twice. When he was nearly out of sight, they stole after him. Perhaps he would speak to them again? He was very handsome, his voice was soft and gentle. He seemed to admire them, too. Lucie drew herself up in her faded lilac cotton, thinking that it was not poor Alice he was admiring all the same!

It was very pleasant on the road ; the white soft dust smothering the sound of their footsteps, the smell from the daisied fields sweet and hot and heavy, and the river shining like silver in the sun, a bright ribbon between the green fields and the dark blue hills. The two girls kicked up the dust and ran like naughty children, Lucie needing no spur from Alice to forward her in the adventure.

In the end they forgot their duties, forgot the time, and did not notice how far they were going away from the village. When the stragglers fell off from following the dancing bear, and the houses became fewer, Remy Arel, as he sauntered along the road, had Lucie on one side of him, and Alice on the other, enthralled by his gay talk of all that he had seen in the world, under the spell of his strange, teasing dark eyes, and flattering tongue.

“ And now for a kiss,” he said softly and suddenly, slipping the chain by which he led his bear over a post in the fence. “ One each, because you are kind and pretty girls.”

Alice giggled and yielded boldly enough, squinting romantically at him, but he released her quickly and took Lucie firmly into his arms. She was frightened but was unwilling to show it. A kiss was nothing, Alice told her often enough ; and she did not want Alice to know that this was the first time a man had kissed her. But she did not like it ; and when he kissed her again and again she began to struggle from his arms and freed herself breathlessly. When Alice, understanding this game, impudently offered her cheek again, Lucie snatched at her hand and pointed to the setting sun.

“ We must turn back now,” she cried, frightened to see how late it was, and suddenly a little disgusted. “ Come, come, Alice.”

Remy Arel did not try to keep them. He took his bear by the chain and went smilingly on his way, tossing a light word to Alice that made her blush and giggle, thanking them for their company on the road. He kissed his hand. They turned and ran, as hard as they could go, down the road.

(2)

Alma, rocking on her verandah, yawning with fatigue, waited for Lucie to come back from Dufour's. All day she had been helping a neighbour a long way off with her hay, and was now ready for bed, but she must see Lucie in first.

It grew dark and the kitchen clock struck nine, which was later than usual for Lucie to be at her work. Alma was nearly asleep in her rocker. Stupid with sleep, she roused herself as someone came up the steps, and spoke confusedly : “ Your supper is very late, Lucie—on the kitchen table. But we finished the long field before dark. Oh, I am so tired.”

“ Lucie is not back yet. A fine scolding the old Dufour woman has ready for the two of them,” Tancredi's voice said.

“ You ! Tancredi Bienvenu. You ought to change your name, always coming to see people at the wrong time,” Alma grumbled, waking. “ What is it now ? ”

“ Your girl will turn out a bad one if you are not careful,” Tancredi said morosely. “ She's

been running the countryside all day after a common bear-tamer. Jerome saw her at St. Anaclet at four o'clock this afternoon, and she is not back yet. It would be a pity to see one of your blood go to the bad. But there is not much chance for her after a thing like this. Giving scandal to the whole village! A great pity."

"What are you saying, Tancrède? Always some new nonsense," Alma said impatiently. "So the bear-tamer has been here, and the children ran out to see him! A fine scandal, if that is all you can do!"

"Very well. Only I have told you she is not back yet—running the country with that eldest slut of the Gravels. You look after P'tit Ange's daughter, Alma Lebel. I warn you because I have a respect for you."

Tancredè pattered off, glad of his success in being first with news that was sure to disquiet Alma however she might appear to flout it. He was bound for the village shop now, to laugh over the affair with his companions: he knew very well that he had no friends to speak of, and was tolerated only for his gossip and his fiddle.

As he passed the Dufour boarding-house he heard Madame's well-known tones raised in a fury of vituperation, exceeding her usual accomplishment in rapidity, volume and violence. He leaned silently against the fence in the darkness and listened, a smile of appreciation twisting his dark face.

The girls were back, and were being driven scurrying about the kitchen like leaves before the blast

of Mme. Dufour's tongue. Pretty well frightened, though Alice brazened it out, by the information that their escapade was known to the whole village and by the consequences threatened by Madame. Alice, who lied readily and by tradition, had begun a glib story to excuse their absence. One of her little brothers was lost, following the dancing bear ; her mother had sent an urgent message to her to go down the road and find him, and she had begged Lucie to go with her, because she feared to find the little fellow somewhere mauled by the bear, one never knew—she was cut short by a blow that she just dodged, and a vehement accusation of being a liar, a thief and a baggage who would come to no good.

Madame, driving home from a farm in the concessions, whither she had gone for supplies of butter and poultry, had met a farmer who told her that her girls were chasing the highways and byways after a picturesque vagabond leading a bear. It was incredible that they should dare to leave their work just because her back was turned ; but the state of her kitchen when she reached it, half an hour before the evening meal should have been served, was proof that they had done so. She looked about her in petrifying fury at the dishes standing unwashed in cold, greasy water, at the broken bowl on the table, at the stove dead out and uncleaned, at the slovenly appearance of the room it was her pride to keep immaculate. No preparation whatever had been made for supper ; the English ladies were calling loudly for hot water and filling her with shame by coming in to see for themselves why it was not forthcoming.

Mme. Dufour, a capable virago, described how she had sent a hurried message to borrow her niece Ernestine, whom she commonly spoke of as "stupid as the foot of a stove" but who was better than nothing in an emergency, and had bestirred herself to good purpose. In the end supper was only half an hour late, and before she was ready to start washing up the culprits were back.

The tale gave her fury outlet and brought a pleased smile to Tancredè's face as he murmured admiration to himself, using epithets that rivalled Dufour's own as he secretly urged her on. But he did not stay too long. He had enough gossip to spice the slow discussion of affairs in Pradet's shop, and slipped silently off with his contribution.

Mme. Dufour exhausted herself while the girls made up for lost time, putting things to rights, setting the tables for breakfast, and finally scrubbing the kitchen floor, a superfluous performance and one only exacted as a measure of punishment. Alice was weeping noisily by the time she had completed her task and wrung out the wet floor cloths, hoping for pity; but Lucie, with blazing cheeks, worked vigorously without a word, though she was ready enough as a rule with her pert answers. What she expected to happen did happen when at last Mme. Dufour could think of nothing more for them to do.

"And now my fine bear-chasers, my modest young girls who lose your heads over a gipsy tramping the roads, you can go to your homes and stay there! My kitchen is no place for the likes of you. You will not come back to me to-morrow.

My English ladies have a right to be served by respectable young girls. And I will not pay you any wages for this week. You can't expect it, breaking bowls and behaving in a way to make your own mothers ashamed of you! Lucky she is to be dead and spared the sight of you, your mother, P'tit Ange Lebel, Lucie Charette!" Mme. Dufour declaimed, getting muddled, but willing to begin her harangue all over again.

Alice burst into sniffing tears, but Lucie calmly hung up her apron behind the door and said in a shaken voice, "Good-night, Mme. Dufour." She went out into the darkness and sped up the road to Alma.

Alice lingered.

"Oh, Mme. Dufour take me back! I'll never be any trouble again, Mme. Dufour! It was not my fault—it was Lucie who made me go, Mme Dufour. Oh, let me come back and work with Ernestine. I am friends with Ernestine and I will work so hard, Mme. Dufour. Only try me once more! It was all that Lucie Charette's fault. I was never a bad girl before, but she wanted to makes eyes at the man with the bear. Oh, Mme. Dufour——"

"Well the good God didn't intend *you* to make eyes at any man, that is plain from your squint, and your mother's squint," shouted Mme. Dufour angrily, "but of course a gipsy tinker with a bear is no sort of a man. Clear out of my kitchen and don't come back! First you tell me it is your little brother who leads you astray, and now you tell me it is Lucie Charette, Thank God I am not

a fool, and I can see just what sort of a shameless, lazy, impudent baggage you are. Be off! My own eyes squint looking at you! You and Lucie are a pair—a pair—a pair!” She added what they were a pair of, but Alice fled from further abuse.

Alma stood in the road at the foot of the hill, waiting for Lucie. She had hurried down to Mme. Dufour's house soon after Tancredi had removed himself from his point of observation, but had turned abruptly back as soon as she saw through the open kitchen window that Lucie was within. She was safe anyhow; that was what she wanted to know, frightened obscurely by the Indian's tale. She could wait to hear the true story of what had happened from the girl herself later.

“Lucie! how late you are to-night.”

She spoke abruptly, and walked up the hill beside her niece.

“Yes—we—there was a lot of extra work to do,” Lucie stammered. “Mme. Dufour is so angry with us, Alice and me, that she says we are not to go back. She will get Ernestine instead. She called us all sorts of names.”

“She called you names?” Alma demanded, flaring up. “What for?”

“She's a cross old hag,” Lucie muttered.

“You are well rid of such work,” Alma said. “I am glad you are not going back to it.”

Lucie replied nothing to this. She had her own ideas and intentions, which were never Alma's. But in the kitchen, seated at the table before her supper, she said nervously, “Alice and I took a holiday this afternoon. We went for a walk,”

“No harm in that.”

“No. A man came with a dancing bear—like last year—and it was funny. We were tempted to follow a little way. We went further than we meant. It was pleasant on the road.”

Lucie smiled, remembering the spilt buttercups by the way, the vivid blue sky, the warm, white dust of the road, the summer sun and scent, the dazzle of the river, and all the silly, giggling gaiety of Alice and herself as they chattered with the vagabond from the wide unknown world.

Her eyes were bright, her cheeks scarlet. Alma could see that she was trembling with excitement which, she suspected, was not wholly terror of Mme. Dufour. She was Alma herself as she had been at sixteen. The older woman could see now the beauty and vigour of her own youth, which she had not realised, which had been so quickly over. She looked at Lucie curiously, seeing herself as Octave Ravary must have seen her, warm, desirable, with all the power and promise of life ahead of her. She sighed, a spasm of regret and jealousy in her heart.

“I daresay. Is that all you did?”

“We talked to the man after a while. He came from mountains near Spain and he had walked all over France—he told us funny things he had seen, and his adventures. He had been to Rimouski, too.”

“And Mme. Dufour met you walking the roads with this man? You were all day with him? Alice Gravel might do a thing like that—she comes of rubbishy people and has never been brought up

—but the Lebls were always proud and respectable,” Alma said bitterly.

“ Yes, I am just like that,” Lucie said hardily. “ Rubbishy, like the Gravels. I did worse than that too.” The impulse to irritate and rouse Alma rose in her. She felt defensive and angry when she was openly put in the wrong; none the less so because she knew it to be deserved this time at least.

Alma’s expression of dismay and anger changed to a look of apprehension that Lucie did not understand. She had been hovering about the table, cutting the bread and helping her to the cold pork. She seized Lucie’s shoulder and shook her, gasping, “ What do I hear you say ? ”

“ I let him kiss me.”

Alma sat down in the rocking-chair and looked fixedly at her. Lucie, who was secretly not feeling at all brazen about her adventure and had yielded to a childish desire to defy her aunt, now began to cry a little, unnerved by the stricken dark eyes that stared at her.

“ It was no great harm, was it ? Alice says all the young boys kiss her. She did it first, and I thought it was fun. But I do not want to be kissed again. It was just for fun, Tante Alma, when we said good-bye. He kissed Alice first and then me, and I rubbed it off my face with my hand, and we ran down the road and home as fast as we could after that. It was no harm, but that old Jerome saw us and he has told everyone in the village, and everyone will talk about us.” Tired and excited, she burst into real tears, flung herself

on the floor and gave way as she had not done for years. It was unbearable to Alma. She put her arms about the resisting young body and dragged her up to the rocking-chair. Lucie was quick to feel the relief and tenderness in her voice.

“It was no great harm. There were two of you together, but it is not a thing to do again. Never mind Mme. Dufour and old Jérôme. I won’t scold you, Lucie.”

Lucie, unable to stop crying, put her arms round Alma’s neck and pressed her hot, wet cheek against her aunt’s face. She felt grateful for the affection that never failed her, often as she slighted and despised it; and Alma felt grateful because she was not repelled as usual.

Their relation had not been a very happy one and it had grown increasingly unhappy of late. But this night they were drawn nearer to each other, into a place of sweetness and warmth where one gave with a heart of generous passion, and the other accepted with gentleness.

(3)

Their relation was not a happy one; the conflict of will and sympathy that had begun almost as soon as Lucie had entered the house, six years before, had not worn itself out with the passage of years, but had continued until it seemed as if disagreement were a condition of life. Alma, solitary by circumstance, restricted by a nature that made all expression difficult to her, had tried her utmost for a time to surmount these limitations. She took the child to church and made an effort

to be friendly with her neighbours. She went to supper at the Pradets', a thing she had not done since Ephrem's death. She encouraged Lucie to bring her small friends from the convent to play at the house on Thursday afternoons when they had a half holiday. All to little purpose. She was too shy to unbend to the neighbours; the children peeped at her as if she were an ogre and were reluctant to come a second time to play. Lucie disliked her stiff attempts at petting even more than she hated to be shaken violently by the shoulder and scolded when Alma's patience collapsed and she lost her temper. If she responded at all to Alma's demonstration of affection, it was from caprice, or because she wanted a story, or a new ribbon, or to wheedle a holiday. Alma knew it soon enough, but she never ceased to long for any sign of love, pretended or real. Lucie had become part of her life inextricably, as if she had been in truth her own child. Yet she loved elsewhere, Alma bitterly thought, when she saw her running for admiration and approval to the neighbours. The woman who longed to be first was scorned. Sister Marie-Incarnation failed in her efforts to impress upon Lucie her duty to Alma, the duty of love as well as obedience. Marie-Incarnation quickly understood that the girl had very little heart to expend on anybody, though her vitality was captivating; but she assured Alma that in time she would develop into the companion she desired.

As she grew older Lucie became sensible of Alma's goodness and worth, but she was ashamed

because her aunt was a singular figure in the village. She disliked her clumping man's boots, and the odd garments she wore about the fields. She resembled this grotesque person in some subtle way, and she knew it, though she could not believe Octave Ravary when he assured her heavily that she appeared exactly what Alma had been at sixteen. She refused to imagine herself getting to look harsh and brown and hard, and she could not picture Alma red and white and soft and supple, with shining eyes and hair. She did not want to be like Alma and she did not want to be told that Alma had been before her with the same beauty. Lucie did not believe it, but it made her angry.

Alma soon ceased to look for affection from Lucie, and she made no attempt to show her own after a time. She learned to be patient and she was always kind, but somehow Lucie made everything a matter of struggle. When she first came from St. Louis she was given to excitable fits of crying and screaming when she was angry; was sure that her aunt only wanted what she hated, opposed what she ardently desired. She left that phase behind, but when she was thirteen and fourteen life became a constant battle. Alma came off victor—always with a humiliating sense of inward defeat—as long as it was a question of enforcing her commands upon a child; but as the girl grew older she was defeated outwardly as well. Often each stared furtively at the other with a touch of puzzled wonder at their inability to be happy together, but there seemed to be no possible

point of contact. Alma led her own life, working like a labourer for other farmers as she had now only a couple of fields of her own. Lucie found food and fire and clothing ready for her when she needed them, and accepted them as carelessly as most children. With a growing sense of dignity she ceased to wrangle very much with Alma, but she defied her calmly when she thought it worth while, as in the case of working at Mme. Dufour's boarding-house. And lately a new element was beginning to creep into their relations, though Lucie was still unaware of it. A strange and bitter jealousy shook Alma's heart sometimes when, herself unseen, she saw Lucie at her sweetest and prettiest, laughing with her companions. Not the old jealousy of being little to her, but a new and terrible resentment of her young freshness and gaiety. Lucie laughed so easily; nothing was spoilt for her. Everything had been spoilt for Alma . . . She brooded on the thought.

(4)

There was scandal in the village about Alice and Lucie. Jerome did not hold his tongue, neither did Tancrède, and Mme. Dufour had a robust voice in the affair. Alice told lies and her vociferous mother, with snapping black eyes looking obliquely away from the person she addressed, condemned Lucie for leading her innocent lamb astray, and was violent in dispraise of Alma's influence on her niece. Lucie was not to be seen, and Alma went as usual to her work without exchanging any superfluous words.

Mme. Dufour called Ernestine the leg of a stove and told her many times a day that she was as stupid as her feet, but family feeling did not allow her to go further. Ernestine laboured and endured for three days, breathing heavily and breaking a good deal of crockery. The English ladies began to urge Madame to overlook what had been a childish fault and to have the two girls back. They found their comfort much diminished in Ernestine's hands. Madame refused to consider it. At the end of the week Lucie, who had been in diplomatic communication with Ernestine in the garden after dark, presented herself humbly before her late employer and asked to be taken back. She was very sorry for what she had done. She would never again commit such a fault, nor take a holiday without leave. She would work very hard with Ernestine, only try her!

Mme. Dufour was beginning to be distracted by her niece's clumsy ways, and was struck by Lucie's quiet speech. She had been a good worker, she admitted to herself. She was afraid that some of her visitors would leave if the present haphazard state of things continued. She knew of no other girls to get in the middle of the season.

She consented to try Lucie again on two conditions: she must forfeit her dollar for the week she had just completed on the unfortunate day when she had lost her senses and her conscience; and she must immediately go to confession. After agreeing to the first, Lucie went blithely off to church at once, and returned downcast and chastened after a severe lecture on morality and

modesty, a penitential week before her in which to show her sorrow for her fault.

Alma was furious when Lucie told her that she was going back.

“ You asked to be taken back ? You asked a Dufour for a favour ? ”

“ Yes, I did,” Lucie answered angrily. “ It is my own affair. I want some money of my own and I like the work. You have no right to prevent me doing what I want.”

“ I have no rights of any kind it seems,” Alma said bitterly. The new warm feeling that had sprung up between them on the night of the dismissal vanished in a quarrel.

Lucie was yet to find that she was under a cloud, a cloud that, in spite of confession and penitence, did not lift.

CHAPTER SEVENTH

(1)

UNLUCKILY it was not only Jerome and the men in Pradet's shop and the village women who talked. Although such gossip would have been sufficient to harm the girls in a primitive and severely moral community, it would have died away in time, leaving no great shadow behind. But the bear-tamer taking a drink or so too much, in the village of St. Rose de Lima some days after his visit to Trois Pistoles, boasted of his conquests there ; speaking of the girls affectionately by name, he insinuated that they were very ready with their favours. Lucky Boivin, the blacksmith, had a sister who kept the post-office at St. Rose. She wrote to him at once retailing this news and asking how much truth there was in the story. As the blacksmith did not trouble to answer she was satisfied to believe the worst. Lucky Boivin naturally enough read the letter aloud to his wife, as it required their united and painful efforts to make it out, and a new phase of the scandal began. Then, Remy Arel from the Pyrenees, having reached Quebec when a fair was in progress, engaged himself and his bear to give a performance daily. With excitement and too much to drink he behaved so disreputably that he was arrested, and brought up in

the police-court, fined, and given a week to leave the country. He walked across the border into the States from which Lucie had come, and so vanished. News of his exploits in due time reached Pradet's shop. Here was some more thread with which to spin the shroud of respectability, and no time was lost in doing it.

It was useless for the Gravel to assert the perfect innocence of Alice. What Jerome had seen and what Lucky Boivin had heard became a finely coloured piece of evidence, woven close and strong and durable. The village shuddered to think that it harboured two such abandoned young girls. Alice Gravel was despatched to Chicoutimi to take a place as cook, and so escaped from much of the calumny that gathered about Lucie's head. Alice was delighted to go and not in the least sorry to leave Lucie to the mercy of the village, since she had been so sharp about getting back to Dufour's without her.

Meantime the season had ended. With the departure of the English ladies Mme. Dufour had scrubbed her floors and ceilings, washed her rag carpets, sealed her house hermetically behind double windows until the month of May, and finally dismissed Lucie.

Alma was felling trees, cutting and stacking the wood for winter when Lucie, in holiday humour, dressed in her new coat and hat, so far unaware of her notoriety, went off to spend the day with her friends the Ravarys. Toinette and Emma had spent the summer with an aunt at Rivière du Loup and were now back again. Lucie was eager

to hear all their news. She longed to go away herself for a visit, but that being impossible the next best thing was a good gossip with her friends about the fashions and amusements of town life. She was as gay as a lark as she set off.

It seemed to her that she saw the two girls scramble out of sight round the back gallery as she approached. Far from suspecting anything wrong she called out gaily and hurried round to the kitchen door.

The house, built without cellars, was lifted well off the ground on solid wooden piles. Fowls ran about in the carpet of chickweed growing thickly beneath. Wooden steps led up to the kitchen door. As Lucie had her foot on the lowest step Mme. Ravary appeared in the doorway which she amply filled, a severe expression on her florid, good-tempered face.

"Toinette and Emma are not here," she said hastily. "I am sorry you must go away, Lucie. There is no use waiting for them; they won't be back to-day."

"But they are back, I saw them run round the gallery," Lucie said, thinking this was a joke.

"Nothing of the sort. You saw Julia with the baby." Mme. Ravary declared, turning red and looking more severe. Octave appeared behind his wife's shoulder repeating, much as if it were a lesson, "The girls aren't here, it is too bad."

Lucie was bewildered, as Octave and his wife had always been kind to her.

"I am very sorry," she said with a clouded face.

“ I want to see Toinette and Emma ; did they enjoy Rivière du Loup ? ”

“ Oh, yes, naturally. They were in a very nice set there ; rich people, too, genteel and well-behaved,” Mme. Ravary said pointedly.

“ I’ll come to-morrow then,” Lucie said forlornly, thinking that something in the house had put Mme. Ravary out. It would be useless now to display her new coat and hat, no detail of which had escaped the eye of Toinette’s mother, or to ask to see the comparatively new baby, as she sometimes did, less because she liked it than from motives of diplomacy.

“ Good-bye, Mme. Ravary.”

“ Wait ! ” Mme. Ravary ordered, pursing her lips. “ Do not come to-morrow, Lucie. Toinette and Emma will not be here.”

“ Well, where will they be ? ” Lucie demanded, half laughing, half impatient.

“ I do not know,” Mme. Ravary said solemnly, “ but they are no longer friends for you. You chose to make a friend of Alice Gravel, who has light ideas, and you have both given scandal by your conduct. You must know well enough what people say of you. Do not come back here.”

Octave, too soft-hearted to endure the sight of Lucie, more like Alma than ever with her startled colour and the vexed tears in her eyes, disappeared into the kitchen.

“ What, never ? ” Lucie said incredulous.

“ Never, well perhaps I won’t go so far as to say that, but not for a long time,” Mme. Ravary

said firmly. "The family is sacred. The contamination of the family——"

"I have done nothing," shouted Lucie angrily. "I haven't seen Alice for weeks and now she has gone to Chicoutimi."

"All the better. Go now, Lucie. It is very sad when young girls give scandal. Jerome was at St. Anaclet, and more than that, we have heard what was said in other villages. I should die of shame if Toinette or Emma were talked about. But that, thank God, is impossible."

"Nothing is impossible as they are your children and you have such a wicked tongue," Lucie retorted in a rage as she ran away, her eyes smarting, a lump in her throat.

Toinette and Emma, pressed sheepishly against the further wall of the kitchen, in obedience of their mother's strict orders, peeped out of the window in consternation, blinking their round blue eyes and trying to see outward signs of evil in the departing figure of their friend. Lucie had always ruled the fat and stupid little Ravarys ; they would miss her liveliness, but they had no intention of risking their souls by associating with her after what their mother had hinted. They did wish they knew exactly what Alice and Lucie had done when they followed the man with the dancing bear. And it would have been balm to Lucie to know how fervently they admired her tweed coat and the elegance of her bright red hat.

"Well, you were a little hard," Octave grunted as his wife entered.

"I said nothing hard," Mme. Ravary replied,

feeling very just and virtuous. "If it had been Alice Gravel I would not have spared her the rough side of my tongue. With Lucie, out of consideration for the respect you feel for Alma Label, I did less than my duty."

(2)

Lucie had had a blow, but her pride would not allow her to say anything to Alma. She was more helpful than usual for a few days. When the wood was felled she helped to saw and chop and stack it, which Alma would have spared her. She assisted in a vigorous turning out of the house. When Sunday came she coaxed Alma to go with her to mass at eleven o'clock.

Alma had given up going to church except at Easter and Christmas. She was too hard worked, and she again shrank from people. Lucie, she knew, usually preferred to go alone. She herself enjoyed the treat of sitting perfectly still for a couple of hours on Sunday morning. Sometimes in the rocking chair in the kitchen, sometimes in the fir-wood at the back of the house, idly looking at the sunlight falling on the stems of the trees, thinking it was a pity to have to burn them for firewood. Now and then she wandered about and picked great bunches of flowers and creepers that Lucie laughed at and called "weeds."

At first she bluntly refused to go to church with Lucie; she had no clothes, her boots shamed Lucie. But Lucie was not shamed; she wanted Tante Alma to go for once, as they used to go together when she was a little girl. What did her boots matter?

Alma was unable to resist Lucie when she coaxed, although she was not deceived into any belief in her affection.

It was five years since she had been in the church at the hour when it was crowded. She felt strange when she found herself looking at the lights on the high altar and listening to the organ which sounded to her as superb as if the heavens had opened. The crowd of people confused her a little but excited her too.

There was much of her life and heart in the church, she thought ; the baptisms of the family and Zélie's funeral ; P'tit Ange's wedding ; Ephrem's burial ; prayers for them all. . . .

She fell into a sort of dream, unconscious of her surroundings, heedless of the sermon on how to bring up children, thundered by the pink-checked young vicaire in the pulpit, forgetful even of Lucie's presence beside her. The church was to her intensely beautiful ; the soft pale-coloured opaqueness of the windows streamed with a subdued light that was the very light of holiness.

The windows were not real stained glass, but were made to look like it by coloured paper pasted between double panes. Every three or four years, the nuns renewed the coloured paper. Once they had chosen Alma with two other pupils to help them to cut it. Soon after that she had gone with Ephrem to see the great church at Rimouski, and the real painted glass there had seemed to her violent and hard after the tender light of their own church.

“ There is no more pleasing sight to God, there

is no greater honour to a woman, than the frequently filled cradle," the youthful vicaire announced solemnly, embarked on the well-worn theme of the family. The congregation settled back restfully, recognising that this young priest, who was officiating in the absence of their own curé, was not going to harrow or browbeat them. Cradles seldom ceased to rock in the cottages of the parish until Nature herself desisted from the creative impulse. The matrons acquired equal virtue in the eyes of Providence if they merely filled small coffins with sufficient frequency. Poor Madame Paradis, for instance, had had ten children as fast as God permitted, and not one had lived round the year. There were pious jokes about her name and the number of her stars in Paradise, but she was humble and perplexed over her losses, her pale blue eyes strained with pain and weeping. It was not without pride, though he too was disappointed and puzzled, that Paradis announced in Pradet's shop the succession of births and deaths in his house.

"But not one has been taken unbaptised," was the parents' consolation. The ten infants, duly labelled, would not be lost in Limbo, but would quickly reach the throne of God."

(3)

Alma catching the theme of the sermon, began to look about her at the faces of the women, known to her yet to-day vaguely unfamiliar. Most of the girls, who had been at the convent with her, were mothers of families. In turn she had envied each of them and had felt cut off from common

experience because she had had no husband and no child. She had not had the spiritual joy of a vocation like Marie-Incarnation, who found perfect satisfaction in her convent life. She could recall very little spiritual joy throughout her life, but she remembered very vividly two or three times when she had had an intolerable physical longing for a child of her own. That had passed and she no longer thought herself cut off from the common experience of women because she had not borne a child. With an intense effort of vision she saw herself a mother, in spirit at least, to those who had called upon her eagerness and hope and vitality: to the boys while they lived, to P'tit Ange who had been in her thoughts waking and sleeping and had never gone from them; to Ephrem as he became dependent, to Lucie; some day, it might be, to Lucie's children. She was not unhappy.

Life was hard enough, but would it have been easier if she had married Octave and had filled the cradle every year; if she had been among those whom the young priest, as his sermon toiled to its close, was ardently blessing in the hope that they would continue faithful and fruitful?

Her thoughts returned to her dead. How strange if one day they were to come back, quite familiar and unchanged as they had been in life, anxious for news of what had happened since they had been away. Zélie, her mother, so small and eager; the boys, such splendid young men; P'tit Ange; Ephrem, so proud of all the children. How wonderful if they could return even for a

day. . . . Her thoughts grew tired and confused ; these were her children she was thinking of ; she must pray for their souls. The candles on the high altar became a great wreath of light and vanished as her eyes closed.

Lucie, vexed that she remained so long on her knees when everyone was going out, was shaking her head. She rose quickly to her feet. People spoke to her outside, many of them said " Good morning," but they did not stop for further conversation. The Ravary girls, with their mother, passed with averted eyes.

Alma looked at Lucie to find her walking beside her without a word for anyone, with scarlet cheeks and defiant eyes. She was instantly on the defensive.

" You would like to be with your friends, join them and never mind me."

" No," Lucie said, suddenly taking Alma's arm as if for protection, " I want to stay with you."

People stared in a cool and unfriendly fashion. Alma, commonly unobservant and indifferent where she alone was concerned, was quick to resent for Lucie something disagreeable and hostile.

She thought it was because she had come with her to church in her rough clothes, an eccentric person who knew the Indians. Though they greeted her, they showed their dislike by ignoring Lucie. She shook her hand away.

" Go along with the young people as you always do."

" I'll walk with you and no one else," Lucie answered sharply. She had not been to church,

except early in the morning, while she worked at Dufour's ; this was the first time she had encountered the collective feeling of the village. Mme. Dufour was violent about every small incident, so she had dismissed her epithets as mere bad temper. To a reprimand from Mme. Pradet in the shop one morning, she had tossed her head and made a pert reply, but her experience at the Ravarys', three days before, had opened her eyes to startling possibilities. So they were all talking about her and thinking that she had done something to be ashamed of ! They were all going to punish her and refuse to speak to her ! She determined to thrust herself on someone. As the Gravel came along she left Alma and ran to Mme. Gravel, calling out boldly, " How is Alice getting on at Chicoutimi ? "

Mme. Gravel, staring furiously across the road under the impression that Lucie was quailing beneath her glance of contempt, replied briefly but with significance, " Alice is a good girl."

" She likes being a cook ? "

Mme. Gravel whirled round on Lucie in righteous indignation.

" That will do for questions. You are an impudent girl, Lucie Charette, and Alice learnt no good from you. Do not speak to me or my children again, if you please."

She jerked her youngest by his pink-striped blouse out of the puddle he was wading through in his Sunday boots and slapped him into a howl. She was pleased to pay back part of the grudge she owed Alma Lebel for her superiority in the old

days, and not in truth much concerned with the moral aspect of the affair.

Alma had not overheard her, but she hated Lucie to speak to such people.

"After all that has happened can't you leave those people alone?"

"*After all that has happened*—just what I say. You had better keep that girl away from decent people, Alma Lebel," Mme. Gravel said, turning round. "Honest girls don't follow tramps along the high road and hide away in the fields with them——"

Alma gave her a terrible look, but she did not raise her own voice.

"Ah, you speak very harshly of your daughter, Mme. Gravel."

She put her arm round Lucie's shoulders and turned abruptly towards the church.

"I have a fancy to go home by the beach," she said: "Let us go down the curé's hill."

"No, let us go on. They are telling lies about me, but I am not afraid of them. I don't care what anyone says."

"That is wise," Alma said dryly. "But if evil people like that woman say too much they will find themselves before the judge in court."

As they passed Mme. Gravel shouted at them, from within her gate. Alma hurried the girl by, not condescending to look in the direction of the untidy, weed-grown garden, but her cheek burnt with an ominous dark red.

"Lucie, I don't doubt you," she said, breathless when they reached their own door. "You let

the man kiss you, but it was no more than a kiss—and off—with Alice either ? ”

“ No more, that was enough,” Lucie said in a vindictive, childish voice that carried conviction.

“ Put the potatoes on,” Alma said briskly. The Gravels are mud on the road and the Desmonts were worse. You speak of the Indians,—the Desmonts had not the excuse of being Indians, but they lived worse than any savages. You could expect nothing but evil from Bernadette Desmonts.” She waited a moment ; “ But the Ravarys—that is another pair of shoes. Are they giving themselves airs ? ”

“ Mme. Ravary wouldn’t let me stay on Thursday. She said Toinette and Emma were away, but they were in the house all the time.”

“ I’ll go and tell her what I think of her this afternoon,” Alma said grimly. She was angrier because Octave Ravary’s wife had dared to slight her child than because of all the rest of the village put together. She thought of bitter things to say to the woman who wouldn’t have been the mother of Toinette and Emma but for her !

“ You’ll do no such thing ; I forbid you. It is not your affair,” Lucie cried.

“ It is very much my affair. I’ll say what I think.”

“ Everyone thinks you silly already. I won’t have you meddling in this.” Lucie was furious. “ I’ll go away to Chicoutimi like Alice if you say any more.” Alma was startled, but she said ironically, “ To travel you need money, and we have none.”

“ I’ll make it.”

“ We’ll talk of that another day.”

“ Well, don’t interfere between me and the Ravarys,” Lucie said, sulking.

“ You’d think I wanted to harm you, Lucie ! ”
The words were so just and so sad that for once the girl felt ashamed.

“ You are always good to me, Tante Alma. I am sorry,” she muttered.

(4)

The boat-builder was sometimes not seen about the village for weeks, during which time he might be working on his shack on the beach and fiddling at night to amuse himself, or off at the Indian settlement, or still further afield, roaming the neighbouring parishes afoot on business of his own. At other times he seemed to be continually slipping about the village with an eye on everyone’s doings, and had a word about everyone’s affairs at night when he joined the little company among Pradet’s select groceries. He was particularly active after Lucie’s encounter with public opinion, and pattered up to Alma on several occasions to keep her fully informed of the gossip ; what was said at St. Rose de Lima, what was said at St. Anaclet and at St. Simon, what was said in Pradet’s shop and over cottage fences ; all about Remy Arel in Quebec. Alma turned away from him with contempt, but heard enough to horrify her.

She sought the advice of Marie-Incarnation, and the nun was severe. Lucie had given scandal ; all she could do now was to suffer, until by her

modest behaviour she obliterated the memory of her fault. Marie-Incarnation's language grew more stilted the more troubled she felt. She was very fond of Alma, and, for her sake, she would pray that Lucie might receive the grace of God and the clemency of the village. Meantime she advised seclusion and some charitable work for the convent poor. She promised that she would try and inculcate the thought of charity in the minds of those neighbours with whom she came in contact.

Lucie began a solitary winter with Alma. A village can readily become a place of persecution, and it was soon misery to her to walk down the street. Her friends ignored her; the older women, like Mme. Pradet, lectured her; others stared curiously, and once or twice she blushed hotly under the familiar glance of a loutish youth who leered as she passed. She stayed about the house after that, sometimes accompanying Alma to the beach to pick up drift-wood, sometimes, in spite of her pride, going with her as far as the Indian huts. Alma still kept up her odd acquaintance with Josephine and presented a small garment to each successive infant. Lucie scarcely condescended to speak to the Indian woman, and she ignored the children, except the latest papoose. In a silent, bitter fashion she began to understand Alma's fancy for them; she could see herself driven by an excess of loneliness into seeking any sort of acquaintance. . . . But not yet. She set her mouth. She would never be like Alma, a sort of proud, voluntary outcast. She would go away and work in Fraserville, or even in Quebec, sooner

than that. Alma had been tied by the claims of the family, but Lucie was free to do as she liked ; she would do as she liked even if Alma made a fuss.

She thought of her escapade with Alice with burning cheeks, unable, in the light of greater knowledge, to remember that it had been a piece of childishness pure and simple, without—on her part certainly—any of the evil intention that the village attributed to it. But she had had evil thoughts since ; she found herself thinking of the boys of her own age in the village and wondering if she would like them to kiss her. Remy Arel's slanting dark eyes, full of mocking light, had roused feelings in her that she was ashamed of and hid from herself.

Meantime, although she had plenty to do, life was very dull. Alma was anxious to get a stock of wool rugs ready to sell to the visitors next summer, always a way of making a small profit, and Lucie was clever at the crude designs that they so greatly admired. She despised their taste, but since they would buy a black mat with crimson and pink nasturtiums sprawling over it, or an orange rug with three strutting black cocks with scarlet combs, in preference to neat stripes or plain colours, she set herself to make what would sell best. She could work hard when there was nothing else to do ; and now she found refuge from bitter thoughts in making the wool rugs. Sometimes, for a change, she tore up rags for carpet, and Alma's loom in the garret whirred incessantly.

The winter passed. With the bright cobalt skies of spring and the sound of the snow rushing

away under the hot sun, her spirits rose again, and she felt in flight for amusement. At any moment, in any place, "something might happen." Expectancy of something happy filled her. She sang about her work, set the windows and doors open, and insisted that Alma should take off the double windows long before custom recognised that the winter was over and gone.

She was seventeen. She shook her hair out of its childish plait and put it up, firm and neat, on her head, curling the bits that she had cut short on her forehead in imitation of Alice Gravel. She took trouble each day to put on her clothes carefully and neatly, since she could not be fine. The snow-bound months alone with Alma had made her eager for youth and eager for pleasure. She planned to go back to Dufour's for the summer, to work hard and to save all the money she got; then, in the autumn, to leave Alma and to go as a servant to town, where she would have a little "fun." Perhaps one of the English ladies would take her as a nursemaid. Meantime there was that sense of dancing expectancy in the air.

(5)

The sweet lengthening spring days, the cool mornings and evenings, the hot, brilliant middays found her more buoyant, more ready than ever to find new friends, prepared to forget past slights. She ventured to appear at high mass one day, anxious to see if reconciliation were possible after her long seclusion. Although Toinette and Emma answered when she spoke, they were still cold and

kept scared eyes on their mother. No one else seemed disposed to greater friendliness. Lucie was so full of some joyful event waiting for her just round the corner, as it seemed, that she smiled gaily at them all and went home with her spirits undashed.

Romeo Dufour, Madame's youngest son, was leaning over his mother's gate as she passed. He straightened himself and called good-morning to her respectfully, with a mixture of astonishment at seeing her grown up and candid admiration of her appearance, that sent an agreeable thrill through her. She was tempted to stop and ask him when he had come home, but prudence restrained her to a prim "Good-morning, Romeo." She smiled and went on her way. But she retained a pleasant impression of his clear, admiring eyes and tanned, healthy face, and was able to describe minutely to Alma his town clothes and his smart tie. Romeo, who was two years older, had delighted in bullying her when he met her on her way to school as a child; but even in those days she had admired him, he was so manly and independent. Now, she felt in a pleased flash, he admired her! It was a novel sensation. She determined to pass Mme. Dufour's house again before long. She would seize the earliest chance to ask her for the summer place that she now coveted more than ever.

Romeo was in some respects unlike the average village youth. He had developed ideas and ambitions of his own as he grew up, together with the energy to follow up his interest in new machinery and modern methods of farming, and a desire to apply these to his father's fields. He had been

away for two years to study experimental farming at a college in the West, and had now come home to practise what he had learnt. His father was getting old and was ready to make over the management of the farm, a prosperous one anyhow, to his son. Old Dufour and his neighbours awaited the "improvements" proposed by Romeo, with a mixture of misgiving and amusement. They fancied the young man a thought too clever, but time would tell. Romeo himself was confident that he could teach them all a thing or two and was eager to begin.

Lucie liked boldness; she began to dream of Romeo. She watched him in the fields with his motor-plough and thought him superb. But it was not till an evening in early June, when she was washing dishes in Mme. Dufour's kitchen, that she saw him to speak to again. He came in with an armful of wood for the stove. Lucie's heart gave an agreeable little leap. In her eyes he was not so handsome in working-clothes, a blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up and long, crumpled greasy top-boots, as in his town clothes. None the less she was excited at seeing him again, and was proud of knowing him, because everyone said he was very clever and that "he knew how to become rich."

He stopped to laugh and joke with his cousin Ernestine, who was slow at repartee, but his eyes were fixed on Lucie, and he took care that she knew it. He admired her firm round arms and the trimness of her erect young figure beneath the big apron; he noticed that her black coils of hair,

smiling dark eyes and bright red cheeks were all the more vivid when contrasted with Ernestine's uncoloured lumpishness.

"Oh, go on, Romeo! You're funning," Ernestine said, giggling coyly and shaking a wet towel at him. "Tell him to go along, Lucie!"

But Lucie would not be drawn into the skirmish of wits. She dried her dishes very thoroughly, not to be diverted a moment from her work. Only her eyes smiled. She meant to keep her position at Madame's, not too well established after last summer. Ernestine, as a niece, could enjoy familiarities with her own cousin, which might, if Lucie indulged in them, lead to her dismissal. She was not going to risk that. She responded with a very prudish "Good-night, Romeo," when the young man, lingering near her corner before he went out, pointedly wished her pleasant dreams.

(6)

She attracted him the more because he believed that, beneath her affectation of aloofness, she was a bold young person, with light ideas. He understood that it was necessary for her to appear circumspect in his mother's kitchen, what with his mother about, and Ernestine, who was, of course, virtuous, and the English ladies in the background, but with certain experiences of his own in mind, and having heard all the gossip in Pradet's shop, he was disposed in every way to think lightly of her. Lucie looked modest and well-behaved, but she gave off vitality like electric sparks and Romeo thought it conscious provocation. There was

queer talk, too, about her aunt Alma and Tancredi the Indian. You never knew about women, and when you did know it was seldom to their credit ! He would soon find out about Lucie. But it took longer than he expected.

Every night, when he brought in the wood and filled the pails with water, he tried, without much success, to get on friendly terms with her. It made him half angry, half eager.

One night he waited on the road and caught her up as she was hurrying home. She did not slacken her pace when she saw him ; and cast him a startled glance when he called out, " Wait for me. I'm going your way to-night."

Now that he was actually alone with her, in spite of her admiration, she was afraid of him ; he was so clever, such a man of the world. In spite of the fact that she often rehearsed imaginary conversations with him she was too shy to talk.

" Do you like me a little bit ? " he asked ingratiatingly, after a few minutes silent rapid walking, in which he had vainly tried to take her arm.

" I don't know you very well," she murmured primly.

" I like you—enough for two," Romeo said, laughing. " You will like me when you know me better. I am a very nice boy ! Let us see if we like each other—some day ? "

" Perhaps," Lucie breathed, wildly excited, thinking that Romeo was falling in love with her, and that she would now have a cavalier like the

other girls—that indeed they would all envy her the smart young man of the village.

“Walk with me a little farther,” he coaxed, when they reached the hill to Alma’s cottage. She shook her head, but smiled at him with a look of coming surrender that excited him in turn.

“Then kiss me?” he said boldly. Startled, she fled up the path. He sprang to catch her, but Alma’s figure, appearing in the lighted doorway, stopped him. He turned back not ill-pleased with the beginning he had made. The bear-tamer, he understood, had progressed more rapidly. . . . Next time he would kiss her.

The season was unusually short that summer. It turned persistently cold and rainy. There was an outbreak of illness among the English children that started a panic among their mothers and sent them scurrying away with their families. Even the veterans who frequented Dufour’s became nervous and left. By the second week in August the village was entirely deserted by the English visitors, and Madame was bitterly grumbling over the loss of a full month’s “good money.” Lucie, too, regretted the short season: she specially wanted to have some money in hand; but more than that she feared that without his mother’s kitchen in which to see him, it would be harder to meet Romeo. She was very much in love with him now. He walked home with her every night with his arm round her, and lingered where the shades were thickest to kiss her and tell her that he loved her. She was still timid with him; but

she told herself that it was because her late experience at the hands of the village gossips had destroyed her confidence in herself.

She had not spoken of Romeo to Alma because he wanted "to have a secret with her," and he was very careful that no one should see that he walked home with her. But some day he would join her openly after church, she thought, and show the whole village, by that bold gesture, that he had chosen her. Then they would be married, and when she was a rich man's wife, she would exult over everyone who had been horrible to her.

She never doubted that this would happen, though she found it impossible to picture herself as Madame's daughter-in-law. She did not think of that too much. Her days went swiftly by in hard work. She flew about, light as a bird, waiting for the few minutes in the evening when Romeo's arm was round her, and everything commonplace and hard faded out of her thoughts.

Glowing with her secret glory, she looked at Alma. Proud of herself, but not surprised by her good fortune, she was full of cool pity for everyone else. It was splendid to be Lucie; it was terrible to be Alma.

CHAPTER EIGHTH

(1)

HAD the weather not been so continuously wet and stormy, and Lucie so closely under Madame's eye for twelve hours a day, the climax would have been hastened. As it was, apart from snatched kisses on her rain wet cheeks when he saw her home at night, and his parting embrace when he took her in his arms and pressed his hot, eager mouth on hers, Romeo found himself kept at the regulation courting distance. He had no mind that this should continue. There was a beginning, a middle, and an end to these affairs (as conducted by him), but with Lucie, matters lingered so long in the beginning stage, that he began to wonder if the talk about the girl were not pure lies. He did not want to think so; and, after all, she was the friend of Alice Gravel, and he knew a good deal about Alice. . . .

September came in with hot, sunshiny days, fortunate for the belated harvest. The men—Alma among them—were busy in the fields. Dufour's was cleaned and closed. Lucie kept house alone all day, a return of the elation of spring in her veins.

It did not surprise her to see Romeo coming up the hill to the cottage one afternoon, although it was the hour after the noon rest, when the men

were beginning work again. Romeo did not often do less than the others! As she ran to meet him, Lucie decided, happily, that he had come to ask her to walk home with him from church next Sunday. That would make their marriage sure, establish her in an enviable position in the village, and make her supremely happy. First, of course, Alma must know. . . .

"I should be in the fields, but I came to see you," Romeo said fondly, squeezing her arms. He smiled at her with a look that was half speculation and half excitement. Though she was flattered by all his looks, he puzzled her a little. "Will you ask me in?"

"Oh, that is impossible; I am alone," Lucie said, quite naturally. "But we can sit on the gallery, though that, too, is rather familiar perhaps, with Tante Alma away. Oh, it is—*superb* to see you so unexpectedly. Have you something special to say?"

He laughed, but his eyes narrowed.

"Very special. I can't say it on the gallery with all the world passing. Ask me in, my sweet little Lucie. We can be happy alone," he whispered, stroking her arm.

"I can't do that."

"Come into the woods behind, then," Romeo said gently. "Or better still, into the barn. No one is likely to disturb us there. I want to kiss you."

He caught her wrist and pulled her, laughing and protesting, after him down the hill. Still holding her tightly, he kicked open the door of

the dilapidated barn and drew her inside. He kissed her triumphantly, clasped her close till she panted, and whispered something she was too breathless to catch.

“What is it—what are you saying?” she demanded, laughing with excitement.

He sank down on the hay, an excited half-silly smile on his face, shut his eyes, held out his arms, and murmured “Come.”

She longed to fling herself down beside him in the hay, in the warmth and stillness and dusk. Instead, she drew back stealthily, pushed open the door, and in a moment was outside in the hot sunlight leaning against the wall of the barn, feeling the hot wood burn through her thin cotton dress. She was gasping a little with laughter and alarm, her heart beating furiously. What would happen now?

Nothing. Then Romeo called in a dreamy voice, “Don’t play any longer. Come here.”

“No. I don’t like the barn.” After a minute Romeo appeared.

“You capricious little thing! Where then?” he said irritably. “You refuse the house—the barn. Shall we go into the pinewood, or down to the fields on the beach? Don’t let us waste time. Let us amuse ourselves,” he added meaningly.

Lucie stared at him, comprehending in a flash, but unable to translate her knowledge into words. “I don’t understand,” she faltered.

“You understand too well. I am not the first,” Romeo said roughly. “Don’t pretend you are virtuous when everyone knows you pick up with

any tramp. You like me—I am kind to you—you kiss me,” he added in a beguiling voice, putting his arm behind her.

“Come along and be happy with me.”

“You don’t love me?” Lucie asked stupidly. “I am not a bad girl, Romeo. I have never let anyone kiss me but you. The bear man did too, but I didn’t want him to. I never kissed him back. That is true. I was silly, but I was not bad. Do you believe me?”

“But I don’t mind. I love you all the same,” Romeo said brutally. “And you love me?” He tried to drag her into the barn again, but she planted her feet and resisted. Tears of despair rushed into her eyes. He crushed her arm violently and flung away from her, calling her names that she only half understood.

“You will never see me again,” he said savagely. “I’m going to be married to a girl at St. Simon next month, and after that I’ll be virtuous myself.”

Lucie exclaimed piteously, “But I thought you loved me? You told me so. I thought you wanted to marry me.”

“I can’t marry you. You have no money, have you? My mother wouldn’t like that. Besides, I am affianced by the church, and that is as good as a marriage,” Romeo said, sulkily enough.

His story was true. He had been rather too attentive to the daughter of astute and pious people, who had taken the old way of ratifying lightly-made promises, by a ceremony in the church almost as binding as a marriage. There was no escape for Romeo this time.

Lucie's look touched him through his coarseness, but only with a renewed hope of conquest.

"But until then why shouldn't we amuse ourselves? I love you, sure enough, and you love me. I'll be good to you. And if you want to go away to Rimouski I'll give you some money."

She gave him a look that was both wild and contemptuous before she turned and ran blindly down the road towards the village. She was afraid he would follow if she went up to the empty house. He looked after her and shrugged his shoulders. But he was annoyed at having mismanaged things.

"I could have said I'd marry her, the little fool," he frowned, as he swung over the fence and cut across the fields to the beach.

On the road Lucie met the Indian woman, Josephine, her panniers of coloured baskets and plaits of sweet hay swung at her sides, her papoose on her back, a barefoot black-eyed brat running beside her.

"Oh, Josephine, come up to the house and rest," she said, frenzy rather than kindness in her invitation. "I am all alone and I don't like it. Come, and I'll give the children some milk."

The woman went with her silently, wondering what had frightened her so much, and squatted on the gallery till Alma returned.

Lucie, with hard bright eyes and red cheeks, could eat no supper that night. To Alma's questions she replied curtly; "This afternoon a tramp frightened me. You must not leave me alone again."

She would say no more, except that she had not been touched, not hurt in any way.

“That is why the Indians were here. I don’t speak to Indians if there is anyone else,” she said in a sullen voice.

(2)

Romeo, by revealing himself so completely, destroyed her love, which was half excitement, half romance. But with this blow to her pride and her ambition, some dawning tenderness in her died. Her youth was shocked; she felt that she never wanted to know anything more of men. They kissed you and lied, but they would not marry a girl without money. They would kiss you and destroy you and go away. She determined that no man should ever kiss her again. She reluctantly gave up her childish dream of a rich husband, but as she still wanted to be rich she thought more and more of making money for herself. She was determined to get away, but she was suffering so much from the blow dealt her by Romeo that she could not yet trust herself to speak of her plan to Alma. She was afraid she might burst out crying and betray her secret.

She had been cheated by the promise of spring and the glow of September. It had meant nothing but Romeo’s falseness. She writhed on her bed at night thinking of it, wild with misery.

“Are you awake Lucie? Are you sick?” Alma would say guardedly, feeling each sigh like a knife and aching for a sign that the girl wanted her.

Lucie would say, “I am not sick,” in a surly

tone, or else pretend to be asleep and not answer at all.

One night she spoke, in the dark, after they were in bed.

“I want to go away and earn my living, Tante Alma. Perhaps in Quebec or perhaps in the States. I must go away.”

Alma seemed to hear the voice of Pierre Charette saying the same thing long ago.

“I can earn enough for you, Lucie.”

“Not enough. And it is so dull. I want to go. I am young and I get no pleasure here.”

“I know, my darling,” Alma said humbly. “But things will not always be dull. You will marry some day, perhaps before long.”

“No, I won’t. I have no money. And besides, I don’t want to marry. I want to go away.”

“I can’t let you go away,” Alma said firmly.

“But I am grown up. I won’t ask,” Lucie said ruthlessly, turning on her pillow.

“Lucie, is it nothing to you that I am the only person to love you?” Alma said with passion. “Your father gave you up and you no longer know where he lives. No one else cares what becomes of you. Your friends here have been hard enough to you, but that is no reason to leave me. I need you—you are my child. I have nothing else in the world, and I will work for you as long as I live. Stay with me. I can’t let you go away.”

The girl moved uneasily. “I won’t go for ever. Don’t talk like that. You make everything a tragedy,” she said, angered.

"You must never go. I can't live alone," Alma said.

"And if I marry, is my husband to come to this house, or will you come too when I go?" Lucie asked with sarcasm.

"You might be near me if you married."

"Then I would not marry if I had to stay here," Lucie cried harshly. "I'll never marry at all. Don't talk of it any more. I must go away. Sister Marie-Incarnation will help me to get a place if you aren't satisfied that I can find a good one by myself. I hoped one of the English ladies would ask me to go with her, but they all hurried away so fast on account of the sickness that everything was spoilt and I had no chance. But I can go to some convent first, and find a respectable place with the nuns' help. Lots of girls do that."

"Yes," Alma agreed dully. "I see you have thought of it a long time."

"I always think of it," Lucie declared not quite truthfully. "I never wanted to come here or to stay. Now I hate it." The thought of Romeo gave an edge to her voice.

"Your mother wanted you to be here. She sent you to me, and therefore you must stay," Alma said with a new hope, "Marie-Incarnation will tell you the same thing."

"Then I won't ask her. I will go and you can't keep me," Lucie said wildly.

"I have saved a little money from the rugs and my work," Alma said after a few heavy moments. "I will take you for a trip for a few days. Would

you like to go Rimouski—or even to Quebec? On an excursion. We might manage that.”

The girl did not answer, and Alma repeated timidly, “Would you like that?”

“I would like it well enough, but not with you,” Lucie muttered.

Alma spoke no more that night, but long after Lucie was asleep she lay with the darkness pressing on her burning eyes thinking of the child's unhappiness. She must try to make her content; she would speak to Marie-Incarnation; she would see Octave Ravary himself and tell him roundly that his stupid wife was causing great trouble for no reason whatever. The Ravary girls would learn nothing but what was to their advantage by associating with her Lucie! That might do some good—if the child's friends sought her out again. Naturally she was lonely for them. But at all costs she would keep her at home. . . . Her head throbbed with a tormenting sensation when she thought of Lucie leaving. There was only one reason why she should ever go away—if she married. She was not very happy now, but her griefs were not founded on anything real, as far as one knew: pain caused by idle talk chiefly. How far had this gone? Somehow, she would secure the future for her. How, she did not know.

She thought of Tancredi and the money he owed her. It had more than once come into her mind that, when Lucie got older, she would try and get some of it back for her. If she were to be married it would come in useful as a dowry. But it was hard to know whether Tancredi had any

money or not. Still, as he always had plenty of work, it was likely that he had something salted down. She would speak to him about it some day. She felt not unfriendly to Tancredè though he was never a bird of good omen in her path.

(3)

She went with Lucie to the convent. To her dismay and the girl's triumph, Marie-Incarnation favoured Lucie's plan of going into service away from home, for a time anyway. "With good, Christian people, of course."

Alma, much disappointed, set her lips and reminded herself that Albertine Trudel's opinion was of very little value. Marie-Incarnation advising her to "make a sacrifice," was simply Albertine talking nonsense. She declined the offer of a bunch of asters and a dozen apples, and hurried Lucie off.

Mme. Pradet stopped them at the post-office, kind and bland and patronising, richer in double chins and rustling silk petticoats than when Lucie as a child had first admired her scented prosperity.

"What would you think of a little change of air, Lucie?" she asked kindly.

Lucie smiled at the gently-heaving bosom like a plump pillow, covered in rich silk.

"You are quite a hard worker, Mme. Dufour tells me. She was satisfied with you this summer," Mme. Pradet continued. "My sister, as it happens, has just written to me from St. Simon to say that she wants me to find her a girl to help in the house.

How would that suit you, do you think? Her daughter, my niece Bertha, is to marry Romeo Dufour next month, and she will require someone to take her place. Oh, an excellent marriage, Alma! Romeo is a clever boy, so very mechanical, and Bertha is a good manager and such a good girl. You would like that, Lucie?"

"No, I wouldn't," Lucie said bluntly, with fiery cheeks that made Mmc. Pradet stare inquisitively.

"Don't trouble yourself about Lucie," Alma said coldly, relieved by this prompt refusal.

"Trouble!" Mmc. Pradet exclaimed shrilly, turning red herself. "I should think not indeed after this. I see it is useless to try and do you a kindness. But I tell you what, Alma Lebel, the sooner Lucie goes away the better chance of her getting a start in life I should say!" She was deeply offended.

"You say more than your prayers by all accounts," Alma retorted.

Lucie did not drop the idea of going away. She talked of it incessantly, wrangling bitterly till Alma's head ached with hot, frantic rage that made her feel as if she should suffocate. She was unyielding in her opposition.

One day Lucie ended a scene by a wild outburst of temper and ran down the road to the convent and asked Marie-Incarnation to write and arrange definitely about Quebec. She left Alma looking dazed and half sick in the kitchen, but she felt only a hard anger at her selfishness. Tante Alma forgot that she was young, but she would show her!

She came back to the house excited but a little ashamed of her triumph. It seemed to her that she had taken such a step forward in the matter that it was now only a question of days till she left. She would be very nice at home till she went, she promised herself, no matter how she was provoked. And when she left home she would write often of course.

Both the back and front doors stood wide open, which was unusual. Although it was past supper time, there was no sign of any preparation of food, and Alma was nowhere to be seen. She was not in the house nor in the barn, and the cow lowing at the bars of the fence, had not been milked, though it was an hour past her time. Lucie grew uneasy. Perhaps Alma was collecting wood on the beach, or possibly she was chopping kindling in the clearing in the fir-wood, where the extra winter supply was stacked. She ran up the hill again, calling as she went.

She stopped to listen and heard her name called faintly, followed by a moan. Alma must have met with an accident! She was a coward in the presence of physical hurt, and her heart stood still. Again came a sound that wrenched her to sick terror. She ran into the clearing and found Alma lying by the wood pile in what seemed a lake of blood, her face livid, her hands clenched in the grass.

Lucie shrieked. Her first impulse was to run shrieking for help but, when she came near, Alma seemed to collect herself. She dragged herself up on her elbow.

“An accident—the axe slipped on my foot,”

she said between gasps. "You have been so long coming." She looked near fainting.

"I'll go for water," Lucie said, sobbing with fear. She rushed back to the house, half-sobbing, half-screaming for help as she ran. She was soon back, holding water to Alma's lips and dashing it in her face, gasping hysterically while she did it. She took off her cotton petticoat and wrapped it round the lacerated foot, shuddering from the blood and from Alma's terror of being touched. It was strange that she was wearing the carpet slippers that she sometimes put on in the house when her work was finished for the day! if it had been her big leather boots she would not have been so badly hurt. She had been using the heavy axe too, so it had not been kindling she was chopping.

Lucie continued to shout for help at intervals as she knelt beside the injured woman. Someone must come soon or she would bleed to death.

"Run to the road and wait till someone passes, but don't be too long. I am bleeding too much," Alma said.

By a piece of luck Joe Bernard and another man had heard Lucie, and were half-way to the house when she came out of the wood. They carried Alma down, and into Ephrem's room, not attempting the stairs. Joe rushed for the doctor. Lucie set kettles of water to heat, and tore up sheets to stanch the blood, white to the lips and shaking with a sort of angry horror.

Alma asked for a cup of tea and sat upright, waiting with patience for the doctor and watching her blood soak the pillow on which her foot rested.

“It is worse than I meant,” she said confusedly, a sick dizziness attacking her when she tried to speak. “I am sorry for you, Lucie. Do not look. Did you see Marie-Incarnation?”

Suspicion was confirmed in Lucie’s mind: Alma had hurt herself on purpose with the axe. She did not want Lucie to leave her; she would not be able to leave her now.

She was not. She gave up all thought of it to nurse and wait on Alma, to cook and clean, to feed the chickens and milk the cow. She was now often glad of these duties, which before she had resented, because they took her away from the sick room. Alma had cleft her foot to the bone, and in spite of her hardness and strength it seemed for a few days as if she must lose it. She was burned up with fever; with all her fortitude, the pain was sometimes beyond her control. When she called out or groaned for relief, Lucie was beside herself. But those days passed. Alma endured in silence the weeks of monotonous helplessness that followed. Lucie, in an impatient fury, was suffering too, partly in anger, partly in sympathy.

When she did not think of Alma in a particular way she was not unhappy. Indeed she was rather important, and enjoyed the sensation. The accident brought all the village to the door in sympathy or curiosity, and there was a great deal of real kindness towards Lucie. The people who had been harsh to her were willing to forget what they had said and done for the past months to make her life intolerable, and she now enjoyed treating them coolly.

The Ravarys made full amends for their ill-treatment. Mme. Ravary embraced Lucie with tears. Every morning she sent either Toinette or Emma with a bowl of soup or some dish supposed to be good for an invalid. Never an evening passed that Octave did not stump up the hill to ask for Alma and stand helplessly twisting his hat in his hands at the door, unable to take himself off. Several of the women wanted to help with the nursing, and they all wanted to see the patient.

But no one saw her; on that point she was fixed, and Lucie dared not disobey her. She lay with hollow eyes, a bitter twist on her lips, listening to the neighbours' talk; asking questions and telling histories of accidents in their own families in immense detail. Lucie pertly headed them off when they would have walked into Alma's room. She would see none of them, wouldn't eat the food they cooked for her, never even asked what became of it. Lucie enjoyed it very much.

(4)

Though Alma was horrified to find herself helpless, and astonished by the pain she had to endure, a secret satisfaction upheld her. She had gained what she wanted; at a terrible price. But she had kept Lucie. When her inactivity made her most wretched this thought warmed her bitter heart. She had hurt herself deliberately—to keep Lucie. A sort of madness had seized upon her when the girl had run off to Marie-Incarnation. It sickened her to remember the shock and the agony when she brought the axe down on her foot. But she

wanted to suffer for Lucie : if she endured something for her perhaps that would make the child care for her. It was a terrible thing she had done, but without it Lucie would have gone from her. She owned the child as much as one human being could own another, and she would never give her up. She felt a fury of possession : to hold the one human thing of her own in the world she would make any sacrifice. Lucie didn't care much for her, but she no longer hoped for that. All she wanted was to keep her because she herself cared so greatly. She had hurt herself more than she had intended, but when she found that recovery would take longer than she had thought she was glad. So much the better—in spite of the intolerable fatigue of lying still she could say that—because Lucie would be the more firmly tied.

When the fever left her and, with Lucie's aid, she could drag herself on to two chairs by the window, she sent surreptitiously for Juste Pilote the bonesetter. To her disappointment, he offered no magic cure that would enable her to hobble about the house ; instead he advised her to go back to bed.

“ Wait a few months for me,” he said. “ I'll come back in the spring and make you walk—not before. Half your life must have run out of your foot. I don't see why you are alive at all. But I'll send you a good blood medicine that will benefit you.”

He returned next day, with an old paraffin tin full of a decoction of herbs, which he assured her would fill her veins with good strong blood. Alma

took the medicine faithfully : everyone had faith in Juste Pilote. And since he confirmed what the doctor said, she did not try to put her foot down, though she would not go back to bed, but sat in Ephrem's room propped up on two chairs, for long hours. She would not go into the kitchen, where Lucie received Toinette and Emma, lest she should frighten them away. It made her smile to hear their eager, chattering voices, and their young explosions of laughter. Lucie sounded gay and happy again. She triumphed in that.

Lucie was not gay when she came into Ephrem's room. She was attentive and moved gently ; but she watched Alma with resentful eyes, and expressed no sympathy. Alma knew she suspected that the axe had not slipped by chance, understood the motive that lay behind. But nothing was said. They spoke very little. Even when her friends had gone home Lucie sat in the kitchen and Alma in her own room, each working silently at some household task.

Lucie wondered how long it would be before Tante Alma was well enough to be left. She still meant to go away, but was not so impatient now that she was in control of affairs and a person of importance. Her vanity was pleased and she was no longer isolated from her friends. Toinette and Emma, indeed, fawned on her, and almost everyone she knew had shown some token of friendliness. The accident was rather a blessing in one way as it had lifted the cloud under which she had been. But it was a dreadful, a selfish thing for Tante Alma to do. She shivered at the

brutality of the act, and wondered if Alma were beginning to go mad like her grandfather—though Ephrem had never done anything violent. The motive behind the act she took to be a jealous obstinacy and selfish desire to prevent her going where she would have “a little fun.” People didn’t really need each other so much. Alma had said she needed her, but she wanted to rule her, more likely ! She, Lucie, wouldn’t do a mad thing like that for anybody in the world. She wouldn’t have cut her foot, even a little, for Romeo—not even when she cared for him terribly, and thought he loved her. A lump came into her throat and tears to her eyes when she thought of how she had been taken in by Romeo’s soft speeches. He was married now, to Mme. Pradet’s niece—married and virtuous. Mme. Dufour was proud of the match ; boasted of her daughter-in-law’s fine clothes, and of the harmonium in the parlour of Romeo’s house. Lucie felt an aching self-pity when she thought of that fine marriage. If Alma had let her go away when she wanted to, she would have forgotten Romeo by now. Oh, what a wicked, stupid thing she had done with her “accident” !

Alma looked out of her window into the cold colour of the December afternoon and sighed. She stifled in her hot little room and her cheeks grew hollow. It was wearying to be so inactive ; there was nothing like the hard fight with the fields for a living. She longed to be out. It was a still, pale day, faintly bright, with a clear, cold blue sky, and motionless trees waiting for the first fall

of snow ; the earth was like iron and every sound was accentuated in the extreme stillness. She longed to feel the hard ridges of the ploughed fields under her feet and to struggle against the bitter air from the icy beach. It froze her face often enough and her hands and feet grew numb as she worked, but she loved it, and the struggle tired her so that she could sleep at night. But she should not complain—she had Lucie.

She saw Tancrède slip round to the kitchen door, and heard his knock.

“ Lucie,” she called, “ that is Tancrède at the door. Tell him to come round and speak to me at my window.”

“ If you want to speak to Tancrède he had better come into the kitchen and I can open your door,” Lucie said.

Unwilling that Lucie should hear what she wanted to say to the Indian, she persisted ; “ No. Open my window as I say.”

“ You’ll freeze yourself,” Lucie grumbled. But she opened the inner window which swung back full length, pushed back the *tirette* of the outer window and went off to speak to Tancrède in no amiable voice. His head, in a worn sealskin cap, was soon thrust through the *tirette*.

“ Well, Alma Lebel, you look a sick woman ! That was an unlucky accident you had, to be sure. You are quite changed—ten years older, and I daresay finished for work. What will become you ? ” he asked, lugubriously.

“ Don’t concern yourself too much with that,” Alma returned. “ I’ve still got a roof of my own

over my head, and when I need a coffin, as you may have heard, I have one all ready for me in the house. In this room actually!" she said with sinister enjoyment, as Tancredi hastily withdrew his head and crossed himself. When he looked in again, she said: "I saw you come to the door and I want to ask you something. Are we going to have a hard winter?"

"Long enough and plenty of snow."

"I want you to look in now and then to see that Lucie is all right. I don't want her to be snow-bound alone here with me helpless. Sometimes the pump freezes, and often there is too much snow for her to shovel, and you could help her. There is no one else I choose to ask. But we may not need you at all," she added, unwilling to flatter him into thinking that they depended on him in any way. "You are about the place more often than not when no one wants you, so you might as well make yourself useful. Tell Josephine to come in too, if she is on the road. I can always give her a cup of tea on a cold day, and Josephine is a friend I like to see better than most."

"There are worse creatures than Josephine," Tancredi agreed, spitting thoughtfully outside. "I'll do what you say, but P'tit Ange's girl doesn't like me much."

"She needn't like you because I want you to shovel the snow for me," Alma said. "Keep out of her way and she'll take no harm. Another thing, Tancredi. Money is not too plentiful. Can you return some of your debt to my father? One hundred and two dollars and seventy-five cents it

is—the banks would ask more after this long time.”

“Now that’s what I came about to-day,” Tancredi said unexpectedly. “I’ve been thinking you’d find some money handy. I have been saving and saving to pay back that money that Ephrem Lebel lent me, and I have brought you twenty-five dollars. It has been hard work to make it, but for you, Alma Lebel, with the respect I have always had for you and the trouble you are in now, I am glad to give it to you.”

“You are giving me what is my own, after all,” Alma said drily. “I have not asked you for it till I needed it very much, because I have a sort of a kindness for you, Tancredi, from knowing you so long, and I could wait. But it’s no present you are giving me.”

He took a greasy and shabby sealskin purse out of his pocket and regretfully handed Alma three dirty bills.

“Two tens and a five. You give me a receipt,” he said, with crafty eyes. “This is business, Alma Lebel, and you hold my papers that I wrote for Ephrem Lebel.”

He handed her a black stump of pencil and a notebook in which complicated business transactions seemed to be set down. Alma wrote “Received twenty-five dollars,” and signed her name and the date and gave it back to him, just as Lucie bustled angrily into the room.

“We’ll have the house frozen out, besides the cold you’ll catch in your foot, Tante Alma,” she said in a sharp tone. “Can I shut that window

now, or must you still go on talking? What's to prevent Tancredi coming into the kitchen if you've so much to say?"

Her quick eyes fell on the money in Alma's lap and she shot a suspicious glance from one to the other.

Tancredi smiled furtively at her and withdrew. She banged the window shut.

"Tancredi owed your grandfather money. This is some of it," Alma said, holding it out to her.

"Indeed, he took a long time to pay it! I want none of it," Lucie said, contemptuously.

"We need it," Alma said with a sigh.

"No one knows how poor Alma Lebel and that niece are," Tancredi said that night in Pradet's shop. "It is not everyone Alma would tell it to, she is so proud. But I have known Alma a long time and she let me give her twenty-five dollars to-day. Look, here is her signature." He displayed the grimy note-book.

"Lent, lent—not gave, since you hold her receipt," Boivin the blacksmith said astutely. "You'll be sure to get it back from an honest woman like that who owes no one anything."

"I shall never ask for it," Tancredi declared.

"Then you must have stolen it from her before you lent it," Gravel muttered, petty theft being much in his own line.

But Tancredi's disclosure made an impression: he always seemed to know about Alma Lebel's affairs, whatever the implication might be. It was strange.

CHAPTER NINTH

(1)

It was a year before Alma could use her foot freely, and then only after drastic treatment from Juste Pilote the bonesetter, whose hands hurt her more than the axe, she told him grimly. But he effected a cure that enabled her to get about her work much as usual, though she limped still, and had to take the hill slowly, with the aid of a stick. She feared it would take so long before she could plough and sow again that she sold her fields to Joe Bernard, keeping only a potato patch for cultivation.

She began to look at Lucie in apprehension of hearing that she wished to go away, but Lucie made no sign. She had been at home all the summer, refusing two places, and keeping well away from Dufour's and the English visitors she had formerly known. She did not look contented and her manner was sharp, but she worked well. She sewed, saw her friends, and lived much like the other girls in the village, though she stayed at home.

"You don't want to take a place this year?" Alma said hopefully one day.

"What I want doesn't matter," Lucie answered, with a lowering brow. "What will you do to yourself next, I wonder, if I say I am going away?"

"What do you mean?" Alma asked feebly.

“Nothing,” Lucie said with a laugh. “I’ll stay at home, Tante Alma. Don’t give me another fright.”

It was true that the recollection of Alma’s accident was so dreadful to her that she had given up all thought of leaving. In retrospect the action seemed more horrible than ever. It haunted her as an injury done to herself, and she could not face such another shock.

Meantime she was not always haunted. Alma passed agreeably out of her mind many hours a day. She was not without cavaliers, but she turned her back on them all and became furiously angry if she were teased about them. None of them was at all desirable in her eyes. She felt a disgust at knowing them, and jeered at them behind their backs. Paul Gravel wished to be her slave; his small eyes twinkled amorously, when she walked past him with her head in the air, but she would accept none of his tokens of admiration. Marc Blondeau, a decent, stupid youth, went to Alma to ask for her niece’s hand and came back without loss of time. Tacite Guay, the only child of a well-to-do harness maker at St. Analet, saw Lucie once in church, when he stayed with his uncle the curé, and wrote her a proposal of marriage, not only honourable but generous, in which he said he would require no dowry, and would buy her the wedding-dress. Lucie said Tacite was a dwarf with warts on his hands, and ears like a pig, and that it was no wonder his parents had had only one child, since they must have fainted with shame on first beholding him.

As she did not answer his letter the curé spoke to her mildly about it, assuring her that it was a serious offer. He finally undertook to convey her refusal to his nephew, who was regarded as a good catch.

Lucie settled down for another winter. Occasionally she went with the Ravarys to parties, but was always cool and scornful to would-be swains. She could not forget Romeo, though she cared nothing for him and the sight of him no longer caused her any emotion. He had killed her trust with her young love. She would have nothing more to do with men.

On the other hand, she did not want to grow old like Alma. . . .

(2)

On Twelfth Night the Judge gave a party. It was an event of great social importance, and anybody with any claim to consideration was invited. Only the most inferior families were left out—families of poor character, to put it tactfully, such as the Desmonts from whom Mme. Gravel had sprung. Smaller social differences were supposed to be forgotten in the higher circle which was opened, for one night only, to all alike. If these differences became more acute than ever afterwards that was only to be expected; but while they were in the Judge's house the bitterest enemies prattled harmoniously together.

Formerly the party had been an annual event, looked forward to and discussed all the year round, but it had been discontinued for many years now, and the red brick house near the Presbytery had

been shut during the winter months while the Jonas family "travelled." It was not clear whether they travelled to Quebec or Three Rivers, or further afield to Rome and Paris. Once at least, it was known, the Judge had been received by the Pope, and Pradet had given it out, another year, that the whole family "had crossed the ocean to Mexico." Certainly they were very travelled.

The Judge had long since retired from professional duties. Every summer he occupied his red brick villa with his little tea-coloured wife, and his two little tea-coloured daughters, who looked almost the same age as their mother, and were not much younger than Alma Lebel. The villa, called *Mon Repos*, gave directly on the street. It was the most considerable "edifice"—after the church and the presbytery—in the village, all red brick turrets and smart white paint, with steep steps leading up to a high, narrow gallery with an elaborate railing. Behind was a small, crowded garden dotted about with stones shaped like cannon balls, painted red, white, and blue, and yellow, striped and spotted. The paint was renewed every spring, and the ingenuity of the Judge and his daughters was taxed to invent new combinations of colours for this gay and pleasant decoration. The garden also contained a revolving summer-house, designed by the Judge, that could be turned round from the wind or the sun, and was an object of much admiration in the village. The Judge often sat in it, finding the most pleasant exposure was towards the street. When his friends passed he was most affable in explaining the convenient

mechanism of the summer-house, and how he had happened to invent it.

When it was known that *Mon Repos* was not to be closed as usual, and that the Jonas family meant to occupy it all the winter, the conclave in Pradet's shop was of the opinion that the Judge had lost money and could not afford to travel any more. But when it was rumoured that the function of the Twelfth Night party was to be revived on as large a scale as ever, Lucky Boivin sagely declared that it was not poverty at all, but that the Judge, having now seen the whole world, had decided that there was no place better worth living in than *Trois Pistoles*, and was content to settle down there. He had a fine house with a furnace in it, hot water in the taps, carpets on the floor, two servants, so that his wife and daughters were left free to play the piano all day if they liked, and what more could any reasonable man want? The Judge was more than ever esteemed for his good sense.

Alma had always been asked to the parties at the villa, but it startled her to be asked to this one with Lucie.

"You will go with the Ravarys," she said, looking fondly at the girl's excited face, and thinking that there would be no one there to equal her. "I will help you to make a pretty dress. The parties the Judge gave used to be very gay and very rich. All sorts of amusements. No doubt this will be the same. You will enjoy yourself. I am glad you are going to have such great pleasure."

"I won't go," Lucie said, the glow in her eyes

fading. She was longing to go and see what real grandeur was like, but she shrank from the possibility of some reference to her escapade with the dancing-bear man, and the subsequent slights she had received at the hands of the village. She had not escaped wholly from the cloud even now, and was very sensitive in the matter. She was afraid to go to the Judge's party.

"But everyone will go. You would like it," Alma protested, jealous that Lucie should not be seen by people that were worthy to look at her.

"You come with me, then?"

"You would be proud of me," Alma said bitterly. "Hobbling in my old clothes beside you."

"You used to go long ago. They are not strangers to you," Lucie said obstinately. "I want to go and I won't go without you."

She would talk of nothing else, partly from a mischievous desire to see Alma mix with people again, partly because she herself was longing to go but wanted protection and was afraid to trust herself with anyone she was less sure of. Alma would not be moved till, with malicious inspiration, Lucie said, "I did something for you last winter when you hurt yourself, but you can't do anything for me, however seldom I ask you. I want you to come with me!" There were angry tears in her eyes.

Alma yielded. What did it matter if old and strange and limping she shrank from being seen by those who remembered her in different days? She forgot that they might be changed too. Her life mattered only so far as Lucie needed her. No one else, any longer seemed very real.

(3)

The party was in full swing. The excessive politeness and restraint of the guests had slightly worn off under the influence of the Judge's genial simplicity, and the anxious desire of his wife and daughters to make themselves pleasant and to put everyone at ease. Madame Jonas pressed little glasses of wine and liqueurs upon her guests, and her daughters Leonie and Julia followed assiduously with plates heaped with sandwiches, cakes, sweets and salted nuts.

Dress was a matter of personal discretion ; the Judge wore white flannels, white canvas shoes, and a flowing crimson silk tie, which was his idea of suitability in the circumstances. His wife admired him in flannels, and saw him still as active and graceful as a boy. She wore black taffeta relieved by a wide gold chain and locket, and long, dull jet ear-rings that resembled grappling-irons. A band of black velvet encircled her thin parted hair. The Misses Jonas were in evening dresses that were understood to have come from Paris ; one was pink and one was blue, because these had always been their colours, and it is not easy to know exactly when a colour ceases to represent one. The dresses were cut low, fully two inches below the collar bone, and had sleeves that displayed their small tea-coloured arms but not their slightly reddened, small, sharp elbows. Very elegant dresses, veiled in chiffon, which showed how rich they were, for each Miss Jonas could have had two dresses out of the material used.

Most of the guests were at once set down to card

games: vingt-et-un for those not quite young and frivolous enough to join in the round games and guessing competitions at the far end of the "grand parlour"; euchre for the matrons, whose extraordinary formality soon melted in the excitement of luck and gossip: poker—with dried beans for chips—for some of the men, and one table of whist, which remained inordinately solemn in spite of the Judge's efforts to make jokes. For those who did not join in any of the games there were albums of foreign views and all the souvenirs and curios of the travelled family.

Three or four of the Judge's guests took no part even in these amusements, but sat solemnly apart watching the others, yet seeming to derive satisfaction of a rather oppressive sort from this mild share in the social brilliance. Sometimes they ate a macaroon or drank a glass of wine very delicately, spreading their handkerchiefs on their knees to catch any crumbs, smiling most politely and a little frigidly if one of the family approached. Among these was Mme. Pradet, gorgeous in dark red satin, adorned with several brooches, bracelets, and chains of various lengths. She was much preoccupied by her hat, which she nursed on her knee throughout the evening, a splendid purple plush of large dimensions, trimmed with many red and purple ostrich feathers. "A very rich hat." Mme. Pradet prided herself on a knowledge of fashionable life, and as she understood that in some social circles hats were worn at evening parties, she had kept hers on her head after discarding her outer wraps in the bedroom set aside for the

purpose. Although it obviously created a sensation, and envious glances were cast at it, the heat of the room and the weight of her finery, together with the fact that no one else wore a hat in the house induced her to remove it from her head. But she was not to be parted from it. She declined with perfect dignity all offers to relieve her of it, and sat nursing it contentedly on her steep and slippery satin knee, a lace handkerchief which she spread on the crown of the hat when she took light refreshments, elegantly held in one hand.

Near her sat Mme. Gravel bursting with pride at finding herself with such fine company; inside *Mon Repos* for the first time in her life, and a trifle subdued by it. On the other side was placid Mme. Ravary, plump as a partridge, highly flushed with the heat and embarrassment of not being able to drink her glass of wine, the taste of which she disliked.

A little apart, but unconsciously so, Alma watched the girls and boys at their round games, her eyes seldom off Lucie, who was the gayest of all. Alma's quietness, her complete indifference to her surroundings, roused a sort of envious admiration in her more self-conscious neighbours, and for the first time in years, so did her looks. She suddenly seemed striking to those who had thought of her contemptuously as the man-woman, a half-mad scarecrow working in the fields. They stared at her curiously as she sat, very grave and remote, her hands clasped on the arms of the rather high chair she had chosen on account of her lame foot. She wore her old, shabby black dress, ill-suited

to an evening party, as if it did not matter in the least, when it ought to have made her miserable. Her face had lost its weather-beaten hardness in the months she had been in the house, had gained in refinement with her illness, the hollowness and pallor of which had not yet wholly left her. Her dark eyes beneath their strong, black brows were hollow still; wild eyes, immeasurably sad 'even when they filled with light and smiled to see Lucie victorious in her game. Her black hair, not grey at all, Mme. Pradet noted, was drawn tight and twisted on top of her head without a thought, except of convenience, but it made a massive crown. Mme. Pradet thought how curious it was that Alma seemed a stranger to her to-night: she found herself watching her as if she had never seen her before, and for the first time in her life it struck her how expressive a mouth can be. Alma's, sad, bitter, tender, seemed to express her whole story. Mme. Pradet, dull as she was, felt it was a pity that it was not a very different story. Life was certainly hard to some people. Alma looked strong and self-contained, a fine woman in her way: not silly and soft like Mme. Ravary, who had an amiable but too pious character; not weak and tricky like Mme. Gravel; not greedy and hard and boastful like—Mme. Pradet sighed. God knew she had nothing to reproach herself with! She had been godmother to P'tit Ange and for her sake had tried to keep friendly with Alma and the child, had done her best to help them, but had always been repelled. Alma was a strange woman.

Her glance fell on her rich plush hat—how beautiful it was. If it came about naturally at all, she might just mention to Mme. Jonas—in the hearing possibly, of some others—that it had cost fifteen dollars in Quebec.

“Your niece is a very pretty girl. She is like what you were at her age,” the Judge said pleasantly, coming up for the third or fourth time to speak to Alma, uncomfortable because she seemed to him so much like a ghost with her remote air, in the midst of his cheerful, substantial guests. He remembered her well as a young girl, who opened the door to him with a pretty smile, when he had gone fishing and shooting with Ephrem. It made him feel shockingly old to witness the change in her.

“I have a good friend here who wishes to be presented to you, because he—a friend who admires Miss Lucie. I think he knew your brothers long ago. He was born at St. Simon he told me. There he is—Johnny Ribot.”

The Judge, looking large and benevolent in his white clothes, hurried away to find his good friend. His cheerful ruddy face and twinkling blue eyes were full of pleased importance as he returned with a quiet, elderly little man in black, with stooping shoulders too broad for his height, and a neat pointed brown beard, whom he presented to Alma. The Judge’s “good” friends were slightly inferior to him in position and education. His dear, his old, his valued friends were found among his colleagues at the bar. Johnny Ribot might have been a farmer or a postman; actually he was a small stationer from Quebec, staying in

the village for a day or two on business, who had been bidden to the festivities as a very old acquaintance of the Judge's. He sat down on a chair beside Alma and mentioned that he had spent a summer as a boy in Trois Pistoles and had known two or three Lebel boys who had seemed to him fine fellows and that he had a cousin in the convent, Albertine Trudel, in religion Marie-Incarnation. Did Alma know her? Alma's niece was a fine young girl with a charming expression, and resembled her aunt strongly, allowing for the difference in years. It was a very agreeable party, and his good friend Judge Jonas looked as young as ever. He himself lived in Quebec, in St. Mary-Jupiter Street, where he often had the pleasure of selling the Judge pencils and paper and sometimes string, and immense quantities of sealing-wax. It was astonishing the amount of sealing-wax required in law. No document was legal without it he supposed. Quebec was very beautiful—travellers came from all over the world to look at it.

Having made these few and general remarks, Johnny Ribot had little more to say, but for some reason his conversation led Alma into a discursiveness unparalleled in years. The Judge, coming back to see the result of his introduction, was delighted with its obvious success. Alma's face was alight and Johnny's attentive to every word she uttered.

Her theme was Lucie, with her imperfections left out. all that she most cherished in her dwelt on with a passionate tenderness: her cleverness, her gaiety, her devotion during her illness, her

goodness. Her listener was clearly impressed. He glanced from Lucie to Alma and back again, as if he were debating something in his own mind, but when Alma suddenly relapsed into her customary silence, he said with a plain sincerity, "I can see that she is a young girl of decided character, and goodness itself, and that she is fortunate in many ways." He glanced approvingly at Alma. "She is beautiful too."

Supper was announced, and the guests went down to the dining-room to a vast repast lasting an endless time, beginning with oyster-patties and soup, and working through hot and cold dishes of meats and sweets, to ices and the smaller fantasies piled on the tables. Mme. Pradet relinquished her hold of her hat for the time being, but reclaimed it—with a distinct air of relief at finding it uninjured—immediately on her return to the grand parlour, and curled affectionately the ostrich feathers round her fingers for the rest of the evening.

(4)

The more formal part of the entertainment now began, opened by Leonie and Julia, who played a duet on the piano, so quickly and with such a fine effect of the loud pedal, that one of the audience admiringly remarked that it was "exactly like a pianola in a city store." Julia then recited a speech from *Athalie*, a well-remembered accomplishment.

"Par moi Jérusalem goûte un calme profond ;
Le Jourdain ne voit plus l'Arabe vagabond,"

declaimed Julia, as painstakingly as if she were stil

in the convent. Her own profound calm was not in the least troubled by the vision of her mother, Jezebel, whom she professed to see before her horrified eyes. She might have been feeding chickens instead of watching the dogs devour her mother, if one judged by her small plunging gestures, and the serenity of her expression. But there was terrific applause as she ended, and Mme. Jonas timidly asserted that there was nothing so beautiful as the classics, they were so pure, and asked Lucie if they still studied classics in the convent. Alma felt very proud when Lucie answered without hesitation, "Oh, yes, Madame. We read *Athalie* with Sister Marie-Incarnation and thought it very beautiful."

There followed a recitation of a different character by a young man with curly hair and an eager aspect, a college student who was staying at *Mon Repos* for his holidays. He called it "*Le Baiser de Roxane*," and it turned out to be a dialogue between a young man and a young woman that scandalised Mme. Pradet. To talk of kissing, extravagantly, like that—with young girls listening too! She was surprised that the Judge allowed it. "*Une communion ayant un goût de fleur*"—could there be greater nonsense? It was a most immoral poem, she decided. She glanced at Mme. Jonas and was surprised to see her sitting tranquil and tea-coloured, instead of fiery red with shame under the honeyed sentimentality of the youth's voice. Leonie and Julia, too, looked as if they thought the recitation as pure as the classics, and the Judge was actually smiling

and delighted—most sympathetic, repeating “*Un baiser, mais a tout prendre, qu'est ce ?*” as if all the time he knew. As for Lucie, she was suddenly tremulous and rose-red, glancing half-scared at the reciter—as if *she* could know what he was talking about, commented Mme. Pradet. In her turn Lucie was being quietly observed by the bent-shouldered, oldish man who had sat ever so long beside Alma.

Roxane's kiss ended. Applause. Mme. Pradet said boldly, “I see no merit in such a subject,” but she was not heard, and was obliged to fan herself with her lace handkerchief to recover from her disgust.

It was the Judge's turn to do his famous trick with three billiard balls, a silk handkerchief, and a hat—a man's hat, not Mme. Pradet's, to which he made a facetious but flattering reference. He performed it with great success, as in former years, although there were captious critics among his audience who thought they remembered that he had done it more deftly in years gone by. “Naturally he is ageing a little,” they explained.

Lucie thought it wonderful ; her red cheeks and smiling eyes turned towards him in pretty admiration. Johnny Ribot, sitting beside her, found it hard to take his eyes off her. The young student noticed with chagrin that the pretty girl in white with red ribbons, who had had nothing to say to him, made herself very polite and agreeable to the old man who could easily have been her father. Lucie, indeed, liked the admiration of the Judge and his good friend very much better than that of

the young men. She had enjoyed flouting Romeo Dufour earlier in the evening, and it was balm to her spirit to see that Blanche, his wife, was sallow and dull, and in every way a "punishment" to a man of Romeo's type. She was in high spirits; the party was delightful to her and not a single incident marred it.

Songs followed. The student, who was versatile, sang, charmingly, "*Ouvre tes yeux bleus, ma mignonne,*" and Lucie, giggling wickedly under his sentimental glance, urged her friend Toinette to open her wide blue gaze upon the young man. Then the tireless Jonas family took the floor again—Julia playing the accompaniment while Leonie whispered to a sheet of music, occasionally quite audibly, "*Mon cœur s'ouvre a ta voix,*" with her eyes modestly cast down, lest she might be thought to be responding in any way to the previous song.

"That is an opera—a very fine opera that my cousin in Montreal sings," Mme. Pradet announced, excited at recognising the song. "The opera is called 'Samson and Delilah,' but I am not very sure whether it is Samson or Delilah who is supposed to be singing. What do you think?" she asked the student deferentially.

"It is Samson's old nurse who is singing," the student returned promptly. "She hears him call out when he is blind and sick, and naturally she is ready to go to him."

"Ah, that is it," Mme. Pradet said with satisfaction.

Joe Bernard sang after that, and then the whole

company, led by the Judge in tremendous form, joined in traditional songs and catches.

The Judge made a graceful little speech and thanked them all for coming to his house. Pradet returned the thanks of the guests for the splendid hospitality they had received. After drinks all round, the men went off to harness up, and the women to put on their wraps.

"Ah, it is snowing," Mme. Jonas said regretfully, as she opened the front door. Mme. Pradet at her elbow gave a little scream of dismay.

"My hat! It will be ruined. How unfortunate that it should be snowing, it was so fine when we came," she lamented. Then she had a happy inspiration.

"Perhaps, Madame, you would be so very kind as to let me leave it here for the night? I can easily wrap my scarf round my head, and Pradet will come to-morrow with a bandbox and fetch my hat home. If it is not too much trouble, Madame?"

"No, no, of course we shall be delighted," Mme. Jonas said with cordial hospitality towards Mme. Pradet's hat. The Judge made a joke about the danger of leaving so fine a hat where there were three envious women.

"It is a grave risk, Mme. Pradet! You may see it next on the head of my daughter Leonie in church."

Mme. Pradet was greatly delighted. "I am sure my poor little hat is in good hands," she said with ineffable satisfaction, removing it and giving it fondly to Julia. "You make fun of me because

I am so careful, perhaps, but although I know it seems very little to travelled people like Mme. Jonas and the young ladies, it is not so often that Pradet buys me a hat costing fifteen dollars in Quebec ! ”

Her bosom expanded with pleasure as she took the very natural opportunity of mentioning this interesting fact. How simply it had come about too, in the most natural way in the world. It crowned a delightful evening with a sense of perfect satisfaction.

The sleighs jingled over the snow, and a dozen voices called farewells to the kind hosts standing in the open doorway, hospitable lamplight streaming past them into the night. *Mon Repos* had entertained brilliantly, and the home-going guests were loud in praise of the Judge's Twelfth Night party.

Joe Bernard and his wife drove Alma and Lucie home through a muffled white world, Alma feeling the child half-asleep on her shoulder, supremely happy.

(5)

Johnny Ribot wanted to marry Lucie Charette. He was fifty-two and she was not nineteen. He felt it improbable that he would succeed in his suit. But her red cheeks and red ribbons, her bright eyes and her laughter, and her kindness to him, had captivated him. At first he had glanced at Alma, but it had been only a glance. When he returned to his stationery shop in Quebec he wrote to Lucie, declaring his admiration and his income, and asked to be allowed to come and declare himself in person

as soon as he had finished stocktaking for the year. He informed her that he was a bachelor of serious character, and had never felt the need of a wife until the death, some months before, of his older sister had deprived him of a housekeeper and left him single-handed in the shop. He was now most uncomfortable, but he would make no arrangements for greater domestic convenience until Lucie had come to a decision in the matter of his offer. He would not hurry her ; his age was naturally a great barrier, but his health was excellent and the Ribots lived long. He was respectable, as the Judge could testify : he had no debts and was comfortably off. He needed a wife and would respect and cherish Lucie if she could bring herself to marry him. He would welcome Alma too, if she cared to make her home with them. He was very temperate, though he smoked a little. He smoked a pipe. He would buy Lucie a piano. If she accepted him, and if Alma declined to live with them, he would allow Lucie to spend every summer with her aunt in her own home. He had formed the highest opinion of Alma's good sense, and felt that Lucie did her credit.

“ He is a very respectable man, no doubt,” Alma said, when Lucie read her the letter. “ And he pays you a great compliment, but you are not for him.”

“ And why not ? And who is to decide that ? ” Lucie demanded.

Alma was taken aback. She had expected Lucie to make fun of his age and his stooping shoulders, to laugh at his impertinence in imagining for a

moment that she would look at him, and here she was, in the most contradictory fashion, frowning at her because of these natural conclusions.

“He is so old for you, Lucie,” she said quietly.

“You know very well that I don’t like young men,” Lucie returned, banging the plates into the cupboard. “A house of my own in Quebec is perhaps not to be despised. We are not so rich here.”

She was very much excited by the proposal. Johnny Ribot’s income seemed to her a fortune. He was old, but he had a good position, and it was not as if there was any young man she liked. She tossed her head when she thought of Tacite Guay and his warts. Old Ribot would be very kind to her, she felt sure. He had no relations, so she would be independent at once. An old mother-in-law, like Mme. Dufour, or an old sister-in-law in the house would have thrown a different colour on the affair, but as it was she was inclined to think favourably of her fatherly admirer.

She answered his letter primly, saying that he must not come to see her before the late spring because she wished to think very seriously what her answer to him would be. It was true that he was old, but she did not like young men particularly herself. Yes, he might continue to write to her, but she would not write again at present.

She did not write again after that, but he sent her long careful letters written on his best stationery, punctually once a week. It was all over the village, of course, how often she got letters from Quebec, and their thickness and fine appearance.

The widowed postmistress was an admirable gossip and full of inquisitive questions ; but Lucie smiled secretly and kept her own counsel in spite of the most pointed thrusts into her affairs. She would not tell Toinette and Emma anything, although they were on fire with curiosity, and asked her frankly who wrote all those letters to her with beautiful blue and purple borders. She had kept the young Ravarys in a suitably humble position since their defection and return to grace, and her love of importance was gratified when she was the centre of a mystery.

With Alma, on the other hand, she wanted to talk incessantly about the possibility of her marriage to Johnny Ribot. She considered all the points for and against it with perfect coolness.

“ He is too old,” Alma would say, and she would dispute that and every other objection.

“ Of course you don't want me to marry ! You would like me to stay here and grow into an old maid too—but I won't ! You don't want me to go away at all, and I don't know why because I am not nice to you,” she said in an outburst of candour one day. “ But I can't stay here for ever, and an old husband may be better than no husband at all. It is not so easy for a girl to marry without any money.”

Alma had partially resigned herself to the idea that Lucie would marry and go away with her husband some day ; but when she thought of Lucie's strong youth given up to the care of an old man (he would grow old while she was still a young woman) as hers had been to Ephrem, she could

not endure it. It was unnatural; Lucie would be too impatient to bear it; too unhappy if she tried to resign herself. Nineteen was no age to learn resignation. Alma urged her to refuse Johnny Ribot.

“You don’t understand how hard it will be, to have a husband so much older is unnatural. There will be some young man of your own age some day—wait for that, Lucie. You think you don’t mind now, but you will find out there is something better. There is love.”

“What do you know about love?” Lucie asked good-humouredly. Alma flushed. “I think I know more about it now than I did at your age. More than you do, yet. The young and the old are better apart. To be patient with my own father was sometimes not easy, and that was a natural duty. It is not natural for a young girl to have to practise patience with an old husband. I do not want you to spoil your life.”

“Of course you had a dreadful time with my grandfather because he was out of his mind.” Lucie said with a shiver. “Making his horrible coffin—I think you ought to have buried him in it, and not kept it in the house. But I will be marrying a strong man, with no such fancies, I hope. He may have to practise patience with me, for I have no idea of giving in to his whims.”

When at length she told Alma she had made up her mind to write to Johnny Ribot and tell him that she would marry him on the first of June, Alma’s opposition took the form of one of her

rare rages. Her passion of vehement words frightened Lucie, who however stood her ground.

“I am sorry to leave you alone,” she said carelessly, thinking how much better it would be to rule a devoted old man than be ruled by a woman who cared too much for her and was jealous of all her looks and actions. “But you know you can come and live with me if you like.”

“I will never do that.”

“Then don’t talk against reason. There is nothing for me here and I must think of the future,” Lucie said, cruelly logical.

Alma spoke no more. There were still days and weeks that held Lucie for her. She must make the most of them. Then she would be alone.

(6)

The village thought it an enviable match. Alma was warmly congratulated across the fence of her potato patch by neighbours who could find no nearer means of approach.

“Lucie did very well for herself at the Judge’s party! You must be a proud woman, Alma Label,” Mme. Gravel called out one day, her elbows planted firmly on the top bar of the fence. “A fine, rich old man like that, who will die off and leave her a wealthy widow—it is not every girl who is so lucky. How much money has he altogether?”

Alma continued to weed her potatoes in silence, her back turned towards her unwelcome visitor.

“You’ll soon not need to be working so hard. When Lucie is a rich woman she can make you

more comfortable. It will be nothing to her, and I'm sure it's her duty after all these years," Mme. Gravel said patronisingly. "It's a pity to see you work like a labourer still, at your age."

"If it disturbs you so much you can move away. It appears you are a long way from home this morning."

"Lucie, now, I hear she has a gold watch and a sealskin coat," Mme. Gravel pursued. "Well, it's hard to see why some people are so fortunate. But I daresay you'll be sorry to lose the girl. She will be far away from you too, although with her money it will be nothing to come and see you once or twice a year by train. Is it a well-paid business, do you know, stationery?"

"I only know what you tell me," Alma said. "You are well informed about Lucie's affairs it seems."

"Paul once had almost a fancy for Lucie," Mme. Gravel said reminiscently. "But I am glad to say he got over it quickly." Alma moved so far away from her that she had to raise her voice to a shout. "I am glad to say that Paul got over it in no time. It was merely a passing fancy, but it would not have suited us at all. Good-bye then, Alma Lebel, till we meet at the wedding."

She took herself off.

Tancredi Bienvenu never shouted. He slid over the fence and stood in front of Alma as she straightened herself up tired and hot, and stretched out her lame foot that had been bent under her, to rest it.

"So you're marrying off P'tit Ange's girl. Well,

she's old enough, and a healthy creature, good for a large family I daresay. But weddings cost money. Do you want some more money from me ? ”

“ Well, yes, Tancredi, if you have it you may as well return what you owe. There will be no wedding—if you think you'll be asked to play your fiddle—but the child must take something with her to her husband.”

“ It's a misfortune he's such an old one, but the young men haven't the money, and it is well to be rich.” Tancredi produced his greasy old purse and counted out some bills.

“ Lucie won't be rich for all the village has to say about it, and I'd be glad of all you can give me,” Alma said quickly, seeing that the Indian had plenty of green bills in tight rolls tied up with string.

“ Fifty dollars this time, and the last twenty-five another year,” Tancredi conveniently ignored the odd money he owed. “ Life will come cheaper, Alma, when you have only yourself to feed. I am glad you are getting rid of that girl. She must have a big appetite, and she is always rude to me. Sign my little book again will you ? I would play at the wedding for nothing, if you asked me to. Good-bye, Alma Lebel.”

Various other neighbours had a few words over the fence, finding all sorts of excuses for passing the house, which was well out of the village and out of everyone's way. Mme. Pradet, however, came with a determination to pay a real visit, and Alma unwillingly led her up the hill and into the kitchen.

Mme. Pradet exhausted her own patience in trying to extract any sort of information from Alma about Lucie's prospects, Johnny Ribot's exact wealth, the size of his house, the quantity of house linen and silver he possessed, if any, and the extent and scope of his shop. Had he a good life insurance?

Alma professed ignorance about everything except that his character was good and that he could support Lucie.

Then Mme. Pradet with importance and condescension disclosed what she had really come about. She wished to offer her house for the wedding and undertake the entire expense, including Lucie's dress, a cake such as her niece Bertha had had when she espoused Romeo Dufour, and a fine breakfast with wine. She proposed to invite Judge Jonas and his wife and family, and to make a very grand affair of it.

She had indeed conceived the immense ambition of giving an entertainment that should rival the Twelfth Night party. Lucie Charette's wedding would be a wonderful pretext since the marriage itself was the outcome of that night. She saw herself bathed in the golden light of generosity and social splendour, wearing her most costly clothes, and rising, once and for all, above the status of her neighbours. She laid her plan before Alma with a mixture of excitement and patronage, her self-glorification drowning her genuine kindness, convinced that even a woman so wooden and ungracious as Alma would be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the sum she was prepared to spend upon Lucie, the avowed centre of the festivity.

“ Mr. Ribot will be impressed,” she added, her pillowy bosom heaving with a soft creak. “ Though doubtless he is used to things being very smartly carried out in Quebec. It will be a most agreeable fête for everyone. Pradet says he will not grudge the expense at all. Lucie will have a fine wedding. You are too poor to do anything, naturally, and no one will expect it. All the greater surprise when the good news is known ! ”

“ But Lucie says she does not want a wedding at all,” Alma said. “ She says she will be married in a red dress at six o'clock in the morning.”

“ It must not be allowed. I have never heard of such a thing,” Mme. Pradet flushed deeply with indignation. “ She will change her tune when she hears from me. She says that to spare you, but of course every young girl dreams of a fine wedding. I can just picture Lucie's enchantment. It will sound like a fairy-tale to her, I daresay.”

“ Mr. Ribot prefers a quiet wedding too,” Alma said. “ I am giving Lucie her red dress, and a carriage to the church. They will go direct to the station afterwards.”

“ I will see Lucie. You are impossible, Alma. Kindness is thrown away upon you. I mentioned that the Judge and Mme. Jonas would of course come to the wedding ? The Judge would no doubt make a speech—think how pleasant that would be, and what a compliment ! But you have no sense of gratitude, either to the Judge who found a husband for your niece, or to me—the godmother of your sister P'tit Ange, and consequently in some sort a relation to Lucie. Well, I shall insist

on giving Lucie the chance of deciding an important question like this for herself. I am sorry to say that I find you most peculiar about it. I will go now." Mme. Pradet rose, not unreasonably angry.

"I thank you for your intention," Alma returned.

That evening as she was limping slowly up the road with her pails of milk, she met Octave Ravary and he stopped to speak to her in his quiet, awkward way.

"It will be a terrible loss to you, Alma, when Lucie is married. I know by my own children," he said, his kind stupid eyes troubled, "how much one misses them out of the house—and I have plenty! You will be lonely for that little girl."

"You understand how it is, Octave," Alma said unemotionally, but she was touched by his sympathy and she could not have added a word.

(7)

Lucie declined the offer of a wedding breakfast and a wedding dress, and was married, as she had determined, at six o'clock in the morning, wearing Alma's present, the dark red cloth dress that she meant to travel in to Quebec.

She asked the Ravarys to come and see her married, and the Pradets. A few other people—including Tancredi, who kept well in the background—came to the church. Mme. Pradet was present, although she was bitterly offended with both Lucie and Alma, and considered that they had wilfully deprived the village of a treat, and herself and Pradet of a great opportunity of social brilliance. She gave Lucie a Prayer-book, and hinted to every-

one, pretty broadly, that she had been prepared to do much more if she had not been so greatly discouraged.

Johnny Ribot looked very elderly and stooping beside his slight and youthful bride, and Toinette and Emma thought he might much more suitably have been married to Alma. He seemed to them the most distressing explanation of Lucie's mystery in the spring, a dismal lover to have had such fine letters from. He was attended by an elderly friend, and Lucie was glad there were so few people to see the ceremony.

She was not regretful nor unhappy, and had genuinely liked her future husband better the more she had seen of him. But whether it was the early morning hour, or the effect of the red dress, she looked pale.

The ceremony was brief. Her friends went into the vestry with her, and there was some attempt at subdued gaiety. But it died away quickly and they kissed her almost with commiseration.

"This is not the wedding *I* had in mind for you," Mmc. Pradet said significantly, sighing heavily.

Alma drove to the station with Lucie and her husband, who were to breakfast on the train.

"Good-bye Lucie, Be happy." There was just a moment in which to hold her and kiss her. Lucie did not struggle away this time. Instead, she said something that startled Alma and rewarded her for thankless years.

"You will keep well? If I thought you'd

have another 'accident' I would not go and leave you, although I have a husband."

Her eyes were bright as stars in her pale face as she looked into Alma's eyes, and her voice was not mocking—for once.

"Nothing will happen to me," Alma said, feeling that she was making a promise.

The express bore Lucie away and Alma stood looking after the train with a sense of helpless unreality. Nine years ago she had stood there to welcome the little child P'tit Ange had sent to her. The child had laughed and disputed, had grown up and gone. It was a moment, a dream. She was alone again.

The sun poured out of a brilliant blue sky upon the empty station, on Luc Lapointe wheeling a truck to the end of the platform on the wilderness of ground-laurel beyond, a carpet of tiny, pointed pink buds just opening, on the birds whose songs sounded deafening from the thickets, on a chipmunk whisking past Alma's feet. Round a far curve the train whistled faintly. She turned away.

She drove home in the carriage she had hired, and paid the man more than he wanted to take. She did not even hear his protests, but went slowly into the house and shut the door. She bolted it, not wanting any neighbour to intrude on her solitude. She went up to her old room, the room she had shared with Lucie until her accident, but never since.

It was strewn with the small possessions that the girl had not thought worth while to take with her; a calendar elaborately made of tissue paper

by Sister Marie-Incarnation, a china kitten given her one New Year by Toinette, an apron, an old skirt, school-books in which Alma read scrawled in Lucie's childish hand

“ Ce livre est à moi
Comme la France est au roi,
Si tu y mets le doigt
Tu seras puni par loi.”—LUCIE.

She began methodically to tidy the room, put it into perfect order, and pushed back Lucie's bed, covered with a coloured blanket, against the wall. Then she moved up all her own things from downstairs, slowly, because the stairs tried her foot, and spent the afternoon restoring Ephrem's room to the shrouded darkness her illness had disturbed.

She dusted the coffin carefully before she spread the blue cloth over it again. Inside it still were the wooden birds that Lucie had flung in when she had insisted on being shown it as a child. She looked at them and put them back as she had done many times since then.

Lucie had hated the coffin, naturally enough ; P'tit Ange had feared it. Alma neither hated nor feared it, and her hand passed over the rough outline of the crucifix with a familiarity that soothed her.

Nothing lasted long : unhappy or happy, it was all so much unreality. Life was a moment, a dream.

PART III
DESIRE

CHAPTER TENTH.

(1)

ALMA firmly clasped her great-nephew and god-child and sat bolt upright in the ancient christening coach, so much shaken herself by the lurching of the heavy vehicle through the steep, cobbled streets, that she found it difficult to protect the infant. The musty carriage hung high on old-fashioned leather springs, was big enough to seat six people comfortably, and was often crowded with twice that number when conveying some important child to the parish church to be made a Christian. It was much in demand in the quarter of the town where Ribot kept his little stationery shop, and marked a certain degree of prosperity and distinction in the family of the fortunate child who took in it his first outing.

Lucie Ribot had long determined that her baby should approach his baptism with due splendour, and her instructions were being strictly fulfilled. The coach was drawn by two time-worn grey horses, wearing what looked like white knitted shawls, which gave them an oddly human appearance. Two men sat on the box in indefinite but imposing liveries with capes and cocked hats. The tarnished green and gold paint of the coach, suggested some-

thing almost royal. Inside it was furnished with pockets containing provision for emergencies—a clothes brush, a bottle of smelling-salts, a powder-puff, an extremely dirty Prayer-book, besides rugs and foot-warmers and a pillow of unrecognisable hue. Usually the more frivolous members of a christening party found merriment in these contrivances, but on this occasion the godmother and the child were alone.

Lucie's son aged twelve hours, unaware that he was taking his first journey in enviable magnificence, wailed feebly but persistently. In her efforts to shield him from the shaking, Alma held him close. Tears ran down her cheeks and fell on the white wraps that enveloped him, but beneath the grief that dazed her a fierce joy and a trembling sense of ownership were springing in her heart. The child was hers alone, hers from the beginning. His father, who could not bear to look at him, had given him to her. Alma felt satisfied at last. Her baffled and checked love for Lucie, her strange dark jealousy ever since the child's birth had been waited for, the stress of the last few days ending in the shock of Lucie's death, melted in a glory of possession. Her half-forgotten physical desire for a child flamed again in a passion of maternal feeling. The infant was hers by all the ties of blood. 'No other woman had a claim. He was hers from his first breath. All the love that Lucie had refused he should have, and infinitely more. All that she longed for this child would give her, because he was hers from the beginning.

(2)

Lucie had not been unhappy with her elderly husband. Johnny Ribot was extremely kind to her, proud of her. She enjoyed being the mistress of a comfortable house, helping in the fusty shop, although it was not particularly exciting to sell pencils and ink and slates and copybooks to school children, the chief patrons of Ribot's. She had plenty of new clothes and what seemed to her plenty of money, and it was exciting to live in a town again. It revived all her childish memories of the glories of St. Louis. She chattered away very happily to her husband about everything she saw and did and made him visibly brighter and more talkative. She made friends among her neighbours, and Ribot, who was much respected, was thought a lucky man. She wrote often to Alma, seeming somehow to come nearer in sympathy in her letters than she ever did when they met. Twice in the four years of her married life she revisited Trois Pistoles, making an effect in the village very agreeable to herself. She found Alma's house less to her liking than ever and made her visits short. Her husband and their "business" furnished her with a good excuse for hurrying away. She was said to be a model wife to the "old man."

At first Lucie did not want to have children. She was pleased with the novelty of her position. Jean Ribot, who disliked a crying infant in the house, was perfectly satisfied. But when two or three years passed and there was no sign of a child, she began to fret and to long for one. She was tired of amusing her husband and his quietness

began to affect her spirits. She resented his age and felt a furious reaction for youth. There was no lover, and her desire could only be satisfied by a child : a child of her own to play with, a little boy to sing asleep and laugh with, to dress up and parade among her friends. He would be more to her than her husband. She set her heart on a child, and when none came she wept secretly, her gaiety quenched. Toinette was married and had a baby with all despatch. Lucie felt clouded and jealous. She went alternately to fortune-tellers and church to achieve her end, but for a time neither prayers nor palmistry availed. She had been more than four years married when she wrote to Alma to say that she had the most joyful hopes. Later, she turned longingly to the woman who had brought her up, begged her to come and stay with her until she was strong again. Alma was pleased because Lucie wanted her ; but when she came to contemplate it the journey to Quebec and the thought of living in a city for the first time in her life (although in Lucie's house and for a few weeks only) seemed dreadful. Jean Ribot's letters alarmed her. They were not telling Lucie but they were a little anxious about her ; no doubt things would come right, and perhaps he was unduly nervous, but he hoped Alma would come and be with his wife. . .

That put an end to her hesitation and she was soon established in the small house. It was very grand, with real carpets and curtains, but to the country-woman it was very stuffy in the pleasant months of September and October. Lucie welcomed her warmly, but in a few days it was evident

that the old inability to get on with her, the old impatience was still alive.

Alma, affected by the younger woman's pride and content and her absorbed dreams of her child as she sat at work upon its clothes, was patient. She touched the fine white stuff and tried to imagine a child of her own with no one to come between them. Lucie's lot was unlike hers. She looked at her and thought her miraculous.

"I believe you are jealous. You would like to be me. I believe you'd like to own my baby," Lucie said maliciously, "but he'll be mine. I have waited four years and it costs a lot to have a baby. If I die I hope I'll take him with me, then I can play with him in heaven. Jean couldn't possibly mind a baby. He is angry with this one, poor little thing, because it is making me so sick. It had better die if I do. But I am too strong to die."

She said it again hours later, when she felt herself sinking in waves of terror.

It became a question of one life or the other. Jean Ribot, stupefied with fear, had locked himself into his shop and could not be consulted. The doctor, inefficient at best and a profoundly pious son of the church, decided the matter in accordance with his creed and saved the new life.

Before dawn Alma laid the baby beside the mother, who opened her eyes with a spark of her old defiance.

"I am alive," she said in a triumphant whisper. In a rapture of possession, she looked at the baby and tried to speak again, but her husband and Alma

scarcely caught the murmured word "désiré" as she died.

(3)

Alma wiped away her tears when the venerable christening coach stopped at the church door. As she carried the infant up the church steps, his thin wailing died away. The officiating priest was ready. A little crowd of people waited in the side chapel to witness the baptism. The name? It had been quite forgotten.

"Désiré," said Alma.

The infant received the water and the salt upon his tongue, without a sound. His little hand was laid against the candle as though he held it aloft.

"A silent child is not lucky," a woman said. "He should cry to show his strength. I am afraid he is not for you," she added sympathetically to Alma. "The child who does not cry at his baptism seldom lives long." She peered curiously into the face of Lucie's son.

"He will live," Alma said fiercely.

(4)

The baby's father was sunk in silent and shocked dismay over the death of his wife. He had married a strong young girl; it had never occurred to him that she would cease to fulfil her obligations to him so soon. Here he was alone again after less than five years of married life. His sister had died and left him in confusion and discomfort,

but she was old and had had a weakness in her chest for so many years that her death had been expected. Lucie was well and strong and young and no one could have imagined that she would die before him. She had made him very happy too, had been dutiful and affectionate and had kept his house well. He could not contemplate the future in a house without a woman. He would have to marry again assuredly, some day, but in the meantime what could he do with a motherless infant ?

He wept for Lucie in genuine grief. They had been contented together, but she had left him with grave perplexities. He could not bring himself to look at the infant whose birth had robbed him of so much. The little thing was feeble and cried incessantly as though it knew itself motherless : best if it followed the mother as quickly as possible.

He listened with a vacant look to Alma's offer to adopt the child, but when he understood what she was saying he assented with relief.

"You who brought up my wife," he said brokenly, "and made her so clever and so good. Who could better look after her child ? "

"I must have him altogether," Alma insisted with white lips. "You must not take him away from me in a few years. He must be mine—my own child. I will do everything for him, but no one must interfere."

Johnny Ribot agreed. Alma knew she could trust him, but she was afraid that if he saw the infant he would want to keep him. She was on fire to get him away. She was restless too, and

cramped in the town. It was terrible to see houses so close together, and so many of them. Only Lucie's need had brought her there at all. Now it was more terrible than ever to be in such a place. She would take the baby away at once and before too long Ribot must marry again.

He arranged that a sum of money should be paid her yearly for the child, and turned with relief from a subject which distressed him profoundly to talk of his own future plans. He thought he would sell the shop and give up his house in the spring. He would spend some months with his brother who was a farmer "down the river." Perhaps he would stay there and take up farming himself for the good of his health. The weakness in the chest that had carried his sister off threatened him too, and he and Lucie meant to live in the country, in a year or two. He had been a farmer till he was thirty, when he had joined his uncle in business in Quebec. Now, it was strange, but he wanted to go back to the life he had lived as a young man. He talked of himself in a dreary tone, his voice monotonously sad, irreconcilable to the fate that had taken Lucie so violently from him.

Alma sat silent, letting him talk. Lucie had married him against her wish, but she was just enough to see that any marriage that took Lucie from her sight would have been against her wish. She had feared that the girl would spend long years taking care of an ageing man, but that had not happened. Johnny Ribot had been kind to Lucie, that was all she cared about him. She felt hard

when he wept. She would not share her private grief with him, but locked it away in her heart. She hid, too, her passion for Lucie's child ; no one should know of it, and no one should share him with her.

(5)

She carried him down to her lonely house and began a difficult struggle to keep him alive. He was constantly ailing and crying, and she was unwilling to ask advice from the experienced mothers of the village, because none of them believed he had a chance. Everything, they assured her, was against him. They were very kind in offering to help, but their talk was all of the babies they had lost. Alma shrank from hearing that Désiré was the colour of death, that the gestures he made with his hands indicated a speedy passage to heaven. When she saw Mme. Paradis approach—a woman who had lost infant after infant “ through no fault of her own ”—she shut and bolted both doors in superstitious terror that she might do her baby an evil by merely looking at him.

The one person to whom she turned in rare moments when she was beside herself with anxiety, was Toinette Ravary, who had been Lucie's friend, and who had married Marc Blondeau, Lucie's one-time admirer. Toinette was the mother of a fat child staggering about on bow legs that described a small but perfect circle, and of twin babies a month younger than Désiré. She brought her family sometimes, because she could not leave them behind, and talked sagely to Alma about the

care of children. The wisdom of ages was in her words, but her experience was confined to her own three perfectly normal and healthy little animals. Alma was pathetically eager for her advice.

Sometimes, if Désiré was better than usual, Toinette would dress him up in the superfine clothes Lucie had prepared for him, and survey the result enviously and admiringly. She sighed to see her own two fat puddings, Marcelle and Toiniche, arrayed in like glory. Désiré did not grow fast enough out of his clothes to benefit these robust babies. Nevertheless, Alma gave the clothes to Toinette, as there was every prospect that the cradle in her kitchen would continue to rock according to the best traditions of the village.

As soon as the child throve better Alma began to resent and dread intrusion. Every little illness and drawback still filled her with terror, but she would no longer call for help even upon Toinette. In her mind was the half-wild thought that she would give no one a chance to share him. He began to take notice now, to know people. He was wholly hers ; she would have no one coaxing him from her. It went to her heart as he grew to see in his little face a likeness to P'tit Ange. He was a fair child with blue eyes, with nothing of his mother in his looks. Strangely, he was more P'tit Ange's child. And doubly Alma's own, because he brought back the days when she—herself a child for all she felt so responsible—had first held her little sister in her arms. She sang him the old rhyme :—

“ As-tu faim ?
 Mange ta main,
 Garde l'autre pour demain,

 Mange ton pied,
 Garde l'autre pour danser.”

as she played with his little fist, or covered his foot with kisses. She put him to sleep with the crooned ballad of the hen :

“ C'est la poulette noire
 Qui pond dans l'armoire
 Elle va pondre un p'tit coco
 Pour Désiré qui va faire dodo.”

Unluckily Désiré slept very little, in spite of the promise of all sorts of rewards. He cried a great deal, as if life was a struggle that dismayed him.

It was a greater struggle for Alma. It seemed to her that in spite of her determination to keep the child and to love him, there was another will equally set upon drawing him away from her. She was possessed by a feeling of conflict, and in the battle with unseen forces she grew wild and haggard. Her lonely existence roused the curiosity and gossip of the village again, as it had done years before. After Lucie's marriage no one had troubled about her, but now that she had another child to bring up everyone had a great deal to say.

“ She has really gone crazy at last ; I always said she would, from our convent days,” Mme. Gravel said, when Alma was seen digging in her garden with the baby in a clothes-basket beside her. “ How can a woman of that age bring up a

baby alone, an old maid, and a cracked one at that! And throwing all advice back in one's teeth, so that it's a pity to waste any on her. She was not so successful with the child's mother, and *she* had a good start. She looks quite wild when one merely asks how the child is getting on. He will be a crazy creature too—if he lives."

"He will not live. I could tell her that, He is just like my little François-Xavier, four years ago," quavered Mme. Paradis. "He lived the longest of my little ones—seven months—but he grew blue and thin, and though I poulticed his head with cabbage leaves and hot lard because the pain was there, it was for nothing. He went in a convulsion."

"But you are being specially tried by God. We are all agreed about that, Mme. Paradis. It is not natural to lose every single child, and it will certainly be made up to you later," Mme. Ravary said kindly, pitying, as they all did this frustrate mother, who wiped her eyes, heartened by the thought of her dismal fame in the village.

"I would have advised Alma not to take the child if she had consulted me," Mme. Pradet wheezed. She was becoming helplessly stout and short-breathed and depended for her gossip upon visitors to the shop, as she could scarcely get about any longer. "She has done her duty by her family, and she is not fit to start all over again. As you say, she was not so successful with Lucie, God rest her soul! I never knew more obstinate, ungrateful behaviour than Lucie's when Pradet and I kindly offered to undertake the expenses of

her wedding. Except Alma's. But I have told you about that perhaps ? ”

(6)

Désiré, surviving his first year, seemed to get on better and, for a time, Alma was happy. Then one day he fell ill, and in a few hours she knew that he was very ill indeed. It was December and no snow had fallen yet. People talked of a green Christmas, but for the last two days it had been freezing hard. The low grey sky, bitter as iron, threatened snow.

Alma went many times to the door, hoping to hail a passer-by to go for the doctor, but no one passed. Once she distractedly ran down to the road, but not a soul was in sight and she dared not leave the child for more than a minute. She was afraid to carry him, in the freezing air, the long way to the doctor's house, all the more because she still limped and her progress would be slow. She cast desperately about in her mind for some means of bringing help, while she busied herself with the baby. She tried to soothe his screams of pain by all the ways Toinette had taught her, but he clenched his teeth against hot peppermint water, and became convulsive when she patted and rubbed him. She rolled him in a blanket, and carried him out and shouted, but no one heard. The child looked worse to her eyes every moment, and his screaming sank to a weak incessant sobbing.

Frenzy seized her. Her mind whirled in sick confusion as it had done long ago when Lucie had driven her to a desperate act. Someone must

come. A fire—that was the thing to bring the neighbours running. Thank God she had thought of it.

A flame shot into the sky and quickly brought men to the rescue. Tancredi was first to see it.

“It’s at Alma Lebel’s—the poor creature! What misfortune has happened to her? She may be burnt alive, she and the little child.” He ran, with the blacksmith and Octave and Joe Bernard close behind. When they came near, they saw it was the barn that was ablaze beyond any chance of salvage, while the cottage was in great danger from the sparks.

They rushed up to warn Alma, and saw what confirmed them for ever in the belief that she was a mad woman.

The child lay on the floor in a convulsion and Alma knelt over him. “But indeed she was not praying,” Octave, awed, told his wife later. He described her as holding out her hands with a thrusting movement as if she forcibly pushed some invisible person back, and speaking rapidly in an imploring voice:

“I beseech you to go away and leave him to me for a little. I was not hard to you—you know I will take care of the child. Why will you not rest? I pray for you every day. Leave me alone—you *shall* leave me the child. I will struggle for him for ever. I love him and he is mine! You have no power to take him, Lucie. Your soul will be lost if you torment me.” Her voice, at first low and harsh, rose to a scream. She looked wildly

at the men, as if she could not understand when they spoke of fire.

“What do I care about the fire—the doctor—go for him. The baby is dying—help me with him. I don’t know what he wants.” Her despair and urgency scared them. “Oh, be quick.”

“Have no fear, Alma,” Tancrède said. “I know where Dr. Rivard is—I’ll get him here in no time.”

Joe Bernard went for his wife, Alma’s nearest neighbour, and found her on the road coming to the scene of the fire. The other men watched the blazing barn, and poured buckets of water over the roof of the house to prevent it catching.

“She lit it herself—look at the empty paraffin tins,” a boy said, kicking a tin with his foot. A rapidly gathering crowd enjoyed the fire which lit up the low grey sky and melancholy fields.

“Yes, she lit it to call for help,” Octave said. “That was the way, in very old times, in solitary places, and this is solitary enough for a woman and a child.”

“She is not fit to be left alone. She might set the whole village on fire next, with her crazy notions,” a woman suggested fearfully.

“True enough, if we brought her into it. So she is best left here,” another said.

“The old barn wasn’t so much value, but all her supply of wood is gone.” Joe Bernard joined his friends, later, as they sat smoking round a glorious heap of red ashes that would require watching half the night. He added resignedly, “There’s a job for all of us, to keep her in wood this winter. Now that Rivard says the child isn’t going to die of a

teething-fit, we can't let it die of cold. It's going to be a bad winter too, eh, Tancredi? We'll all have to lend a hand. Alma will be in the asylum if we let the child die. I never heard anything so cracked as her prayers."

"Indeed she was not praying," Octave said in a slow, mysterious voice.

CHAPTER ELEVENTH

(1)

ALMA was convinced that she was fighting the supernatural in her efforts to keep the frail thread of the child's life unsnapped. Lucie wanted him; more than that, she did not want Alma to have him. She had said so before he was born, and after death she was fighting for him. She had grudged giving anything to Alma: always she had had a jealousy of her possessions, sharing them more readily with outsiders than at home. To leave behind her—to Alma—the child her own heart had been set upon so passionately was a bitterness that kept her from her rest and brought her back to trouble about mortal things. Alma believed this though it was confusing and mysterious. She became cunning in her determination to outwit Lucie, sure that only unremitting vigilance could succeed. She alternately prayed and threatened when she addressed the Unseen, kneeling by the child's bed for hours every night, till sometimes she fell asleep on the floor. A cross of blessed palm hung over the head of his bed, and a horse-shoe was nailed at the foot. She hung medals round Désiré's neck to protect his person and often crossed him with holy water.

She omitted no superstition that could "bring luck," and was scrupulous to avoid everything that

might cause harm or misfortune. She searched for four-leaved clovers for his little hands to pull to pieces, but she would not let him touch the grey-green, furry everlasting flowers that the villagers used to make into wreaths to decorate their graves on All Souls Day.

When he was two years old he was still so small and light that she could carry him for long distances into the fields and woods. She would take his basket and enthrone him in it, decorating it gaily with flowers to amuse him. Never a spray of hawthorn because that was unlucky, but every field flower was plucked for his delight. These were hours of pure happiness for Alma. Once she made his basket bright with rock-cranberries, the clear red and green of the tiny apples enchanting him to close and grave examination, while she wreathed together chokecherry and sumach and the compact, vermilion pigeonberries, and hung them about him till, immensely happy, he sat in a bower of green and scarlet. Then, suddenly, in the midst of his delight and wonder over his bright playthings, a chill seemed to fall on the hot sunlit day. Alma remembered that scarlet was Lucie's colour. She had always loved it so much that to put it near her baby might "bring" her. With a violence that startled Désiré into a howl of grief, Alma tore away the sprays she had gathered. Her pleasure was shattered for that day, and she hurried him off. She added to her list of superstitions anything of a red colour. He must not have red near him; she was sure it would be unlucky.

One day Tancredi appeared at her door with a gift that he had made for the child, a carriage with long handles, so that Alma could push or pull it, and which by a simple contrivance, when the wheels were taken off, became a sleigh for winter. Made with skill, the Indian had fitted it with bear-skin rugs of his own shooting and curing, and was in high good-humour with himself.

“Your grandchild will go out in that like a prince, my girl.”

“Be civil when you speak to me, please. I am not so sure that I want your present. Let me look at it,” Alma said sharply.

She examined it carefully; it was painted a bright blue, and the rugs were piped with yellow cloth.

“I had no red paint, I am sorry to say, and Josephine who lined the skins had no red flannel. Red is more usual, and is gayer for winter,” Tancredi said apologetically.

“I hate red. I wouldn’t take it at all if it was red. Blue is well enough,” Alma said, hastily.

“Well, how much do you want for it, Tancredi?”

“I said it was a present. You are suspicious,” the Indian grumbled.

“I have known you a long time, you see.”

“It is a present all the same—I have taken time over it, a fine little cart like that. But if you like to forget the little sum of money I still owe you——”

“So that’s it? Very well, I’ll take it. Twenty-seven dollars and seventy-five cents is enough money and no one would give it for a rough cart like that, but it will be a convenience, since the

child is growing too heavy for me. I am glad you thought of it."

"I have always thought highly of you, Alma Lebel. How often do I tell you that? It is no trouble to do you favours sometimes."

"The carriage for the child is a well-paid favour at least; but in your way you are not disobliging."

"The child is growing a big boy." Tancredi was pleased with this commendation. "He does not dislike me either, as his mother did—see?"

The baby indeed was leaning out of Alma's arms and displaying every sign of friendliness towards the boat-builder, whose stumpy black forefinger he clutched. His fair fragility struck Tancredi as amazing beside Alma's swarthy darkness.

"He's like a little white sail-boat, with new canvas, between two battered, tarry old schooners—you and me, Alma Lebel," he said feelingly. "You wouldn't think he'd travel far, but that remains to be seen."

Alma frowned and crossed herself.

"You will bring him bad luck," she said superstitiously, her mouth set in an angry line. A secret, cautious look came into her eyes.

"I have to be careful because in some ways he is not a lucky child. Do you know any charms, Tancredi, against evil spirits?" Her voice sank mysteriously. "I have all I can do to fight them."

"Seagulls' feathers are a protection—the small ones you pick up when the tide is out," the Indian said, humouring her. "Let the boy wear some of those. And consult Josephine; she is experienced in such matters."

“ I will—to-morrow,” Alma said eagerly.

Ready to follow any advice of this kind, she lost no time in taking Désiré over to the Indian settlement, where, as the result of a long confabulation with Josephine, the carriage made by Tancrède was hung round with beads and Indian trinkets. She learnt to pronounce incantations, other than her prayers, over the child, to protect him from malevolent spirits, the evil eye, illness, and unnamed disasters. When he went out he wore a little collar of seagulls' feathers which pleased him.

With all her vigilance he managed to grow a little and, for some time, he gave no cause for anxiety. A delicate, quiet little boy, he was intelligent and gentle. He played with shells, flowers and other trifles that Josephine brought him, and loved the birds that Ephrem had carved.

(2)

Alma knew a measure of tranquillity, but not for long. The voices she stilled by prayer and magic were never really banished. Sometimes they rose like a tide, the air full of whispers ; quick sighing whispers, all round her, as if a thousand spirits chattered noiselessly. She could never distinguish what they said, though she seemed to comé near it often. But then, the noise grew and grew, and crashed against her ears and made her cower. They laughed mockingly and soundlessly because she could not understand their menaces. She knew they threatened her, that they meant harm to the child ; but however quickly she turned her head she just missed their words. She heard

them everywhere; on the beach, mingling with the cries of the gulls and the harsh quarrelsome cawing of the crows and the sound of the waves—all of which she knew to be real sounds, though they were powerless to drown the voices; in the woods when the leaves stirred and when they hung motionless; more than anywhere in the house. They came at any hour; when she was cooking and working, when the boy slept, but most of all at night. She heard them gather, whispering, from every corner of the floor and ceiling, from the kitchen, Ephrem's room, the unused parlour, the stairs, an increasing multitude of spirits coming to torment her with their mysterious threats, invading her room in such numbers that she could scarcely breathe.

Among them, leading them indeed, was Lucie's spirit, seeking to tear away the spirit of her child. Alma would lean over him on her elbow, sweat pouring off her as she fought with muttered prayers. The clamorous voices would retreat and die away.

A period of peace would follow.

She felt safest in the fields, where the cattle were grazing and it was a familiar sight to see her there with the child.

In a field he had bought from her, Joe Bernard stopped to speak to her one day.

"Eh, Alma! You don't mind the bull then? I think he is quiet, but there is always some risk—with the little fellow you might get a fright. I wouldn't say it was too safe."

Alma looked up tranquilly, quite composed and answered mysteriously, "I am not afraid. Our

Lord chose to be born among the cattle, and for that reason I like to be near them too. I think it is very safe for a little child."

"Perhaps you may be right," Joe responded doubtfully, "but I have known cattle which did not remember Our Lord. It is a long time since then. But as I said, I think the bull is a quiet beast."

No harm came to her or the child and she spent most of her days in the fields until, with the cold weather, the animals were housed, and the fancy left her mind.

When the snow fell she pushed Désiré about in his sleigh, taking him often into the church. He liked the candles and the warmth and usually fell asleep in her arms. Sometimes they both slept, and it was hard to wake and go out again into the cold. People used to meet her hurrying home in the dusk, turning her head restlessly from side to side as though she expected to be followed, resentful if they tried to stop her, or take any notice of the baby.

"This is not a good time to speak to me," she would say angrily, and would quicken her limping gait. Her words became a jest in the village; it was never a good time to speak to Alma.

(3)

One day, when she was exhausted by her struggle with hostile powers, the thought occurred to her that though her house was haunted by Lucie, and the woods, and the beach that had been her familiar playground, perhaps elsewhere she would

find freedom. Lucie was here in thought and memory, in association, in the recollection of endless battles; the house was full of her and there was no escape. Quite suddenly Alma left it.

She hastily flung a few things together, made a bundle of them, and after locking both doors of the house, she took the child in his wheeled cart and set off to find somewhere else to live. She had in mind a one-roomed cottage that had long been deserted by its owners and was reputed to be haunted. That fact, curiously enough, did not weigh with her. It was far beyond Trois Pistoles, at a place called Côte-de-la-Misère. The cottage itself was remote from any neighbours, set in marshy fields close to the beach.

She found it quite habitable, and no one objected to her taking possession. She did not mean to give up her own house for ever; her hope was to outwit Lucie. By the time "they" had found out where she was, she could slip back and trick them, she thought cunningly.

She lived a summer in the cottage, untroubled by the ghosts that were popularly supposed to haunt, it and relieved of her terrors, Désiré flourished. He could now run about sturdily; he began to talk and to repeat Alma's rhymes. The clasp of his arms and the touch of his cheek against hers filled her with joy. He was wholly her child, as she had determined. He knew no one else; the sight of a stranger made him bury his face in her neck and cling to her with all the force of his little body. If anyone spoke to him

he cried and Alma trembled with happiness because she was everything to him.

It was mid-September, a day of heavy warmth, dark with clouds and an approaching thunder-storm. Désiré was restless ; and Alma, sitting in her doorway, rocked him in her arms. Sheet lightning played beyond the river, illuminating the dark waters and the leaden sky with a livid glare. Now and then a drop of rain fell, but the storm was long in breaking. The distant crashes of thunder were frequent. The air seemed to have been sucked away from the earth ; the breathless atmosphere was suffocating.

Alma rocked gently back and forth, crooning monotonously to the child, pushing back the damp clinging hair from his forehead and sometimes pressing her lips to it. His eyes closed, but she dare not put him down for fear of rousing him to fretful tears. The sultriness oppressed her ; but a deep uneasiness was held in check while the boy was in her arms.

Between the flashes of lightning darkness was intense. Looking across the fields, she saw that the marshes were full of flitting lights. Her eyes widened and she gripped the child with a start of fear. He woke with a cry. She rocked him, but he continued to whimper miserably, adding to her sudden agony of nerves. Ignorant people thought that those lights were fireflies or will-o'-the-wisps, but she knew better. They were lost souls, unhappy souls seeking to destroy the living if they could lead them astray ; miserable, outcast souls

trying to revenge themselves. The livid night was thick with evil. She was thankful when the white sheets of lightning wiped out all lesser lights, picking out every leaf and blade in the fields in brilliant detail, and bringing the trees mysteriously near.

She rose, shut and locked the door, closed the blinds and lit two candles. It was stifling in the house, and great moths, shut in during the day, blundered about the room and tortured her. Désiré lay languidly in her arms, his blue eyes open and shadowed, worn out with the heat of the day. Now and again the candles paled in the flashes of lightning that raked the room.

Those lights—those lost souls wandering in discomfort in the marsh—they meant harm! Why had they come? She had been so peaceful all the summer, had seen no sign of danger. She tried to forget the flitting fires, but she was afraid.

She put the child to bed and lay down beside him, first blowing out the candles. Evil was abroad; though she suffocated she would not open the window . . . lost souls in the marsh. . . . She clutched her beads and prayed aloud.

The storm came nearer. The tension of her nerves increased as the wind rose and the first tremendous peal of thunder crashed directly overhead. It seemed to split the sky, and peal after peal followed. She almost shouted her prayers, and held the terrified child against her breast to still his cries. The rain fell like a cloud-burst, drowning the wind, bringing relief. It beat on the cottage roof, swept the fields, was a solid mass

against the solid mass of the river. Its violence was quickly spent. The thunder rumbled far off, and the terrible pressure lifted.

Alma rose, carrying the child, who had ceased to cry, and opened the window, still half-afraid to look across the marsh. The rapidly clearing sky was lucent with coming moonlight. There were no fires dancing in the fields! The rain still fell, but gently, and the refreshed air was sweet in her face. The evil was gone. She opened her door wide to the pure night.

(4)

The child slept quietly beside her, a healthy colour in his face now that the oppression of the storm was over. Rain trickled off the roof. The leaves of the aspen tree at the door shook sudden showers against the cottage and in upon the floor of the room. Alma had no fear of human dangers, and the window and door remained wide open.

The moon rode free of the tattered dispersing clouds and dipped the world in light; it made the aspen leaves sparkle, and gleamed on the white crests of the waves where the tide came roughly in on the beach below.

Composed and tranquil now, Alma had no desire to sleep. Her mind had never been more clear. She thought of the fears and fevers of her life and wondered that her existence should be so apprehensive, so furtive, so dismayed. Why did she think only of a hostile Lucie? They had been happy together sometimes, and she had always loved the girl. Her love ought to reach her now,

and her prayers help her. Lucie had not been clamorous and hating in life : not always pitting her will and her ingenuity against Alma's. Perhaps she, Alma, had been the victim of sick fancies when she imagined Lucie contesting beyond this life for her child ? The horror and grief of Lucie's death had overwhelmed her, her loss was a wound that Désiré could not cure, passionately as she wanted him.

She had cried " Save Lucie first—Lucie, Lucie ! " and had battered on the door of the shop, calling to Jean Ribot to make him hear that a life was at stake. But he had refused to hear, and Lucie's chance was gone when she had returned to her room. She would have given the blood of her heart for her. . . . Now, it seemed, a desperate issue lay between them, their very souls fought each other ! But no—she had imagined all that : it was a sick fancy, over now and gone, thank God. Her mind felt as clear and serene as the summer sky, washed in mild radiance, ineffably far from storm or pain. Those frenzied outbursts of misery were gone for ever. Lucie had her love and her prayers, the boy her utmost care ; no one threatened a little innocent child. He slept sweetly in her arms. She would bless him and sleep too.

She closed her eyes, but her mind was still too active for sleep. Those lights, dancing in the marsh, were perhaps unfortunate souls as people said, souls so gross that they were shut out of paradise and condemned to wander still on the earth, vindictive and disconsolate. But why had she fancied, even for a moment, that they were the souls of her

brothers drowned so long ago—and Lucie's soul? Lucie had given her life for her child's life, and by that supreme sacrifice had atoned for every sin she had ever committed. A woman, dying at such a moment, was purified by white fire. Many believed that she scarcely knew purgatory, but was taken straight to God. How could she have doubted that a mother, dead in childbirth, was at rest?

She had feared for the boys' souls always, because they had been taken suddenly and unprepared, but the many, many prayers offered for them must have eased their pain by now. God was good. The dead lay within His hand and He was compassionate. She must have faith. She thought of demons because her heart was dark and troubled. On a night such as this angels must be abroad, walking the clear fields of the sky, guardian angels, the sound of their wings in the infinitely soft breath of the wind, the light of their faces diffused through the pure air.

The aspen leaves shone like jewels and shook off the sparkling raindrops with a faint music. The surf beat less loudly on the shore; the effect of the storm was passing, and the tide must be nearly full now. Alma slept.

(5)

She woke to the same exquisite tranquillity, a profound peace of mind and body, and lay for a moment, her eyes closing again, drowsy. Then she looked about her, surprised that the sun lay yellow on the walls. It was later than her usual

hour for rising ; she and the child must have been exhausted by the storm, they had slept so long. She turned with precaution, so as not to wake Désiré sooner than need be, and found his place empty. She put out her hand stupidly and the pillow was cold to her touch. He was not hiding beneath the clothes, not under the bed, nor in the room. He was gone. Suffocated by fear, she ran out of the house, her black hair streaming over her unbleached cotton night-gown, her feet bare. The long, wrinkled, yellowish scar on her foot sickened her momentarily, as it always did when she first saw it. She called the child round the house, oblivious of everything except fear. Who—what—had taken him from her ? She shrieked dementedly.

Then she saw him across the field, going through the long grass rapidly enough in spite of frequent tumbles, and heading for the beach. She limped after him and caught him and sank down gasping in the grass. Though the world turned black and her forehead was damp with sweat, her hands remembered to clutch him tight. His angry cries restored her to a sort of consciousness, but she let him shriek, unable for any effort beyond her fierce clasp.

Presently she sat up and began to soothe him, the realisation that they were both in their night-dresses and bare feet helping her to pull herself together. She saw Désiré's blue eyes fascinated by the yellow scar on her foot. She shivered and felt sick and shaken as she rose heavily and carried him into the house. He stroked her face and cuddled

up to her as if he knew that his adventure had cost her dear. She devoured him with kisses.

The peace of the night was shattered : she no longer recollected that she had said that fear was gone from her for ever. It had come back.

She was now eager to leave the cottage at Côte-de-la-Misère and return to her own house where she would be as safe as anywhere else. She rose a dozen times that night to look fearfully out of doors, seeking vainly for the blessed serenity she had felt twenty-four hours earlier. The night was calm and fine, goblin fires, omens of evil, flickered over the fields ; voices sighed round her warning her to go home.

At dawn she dressed the child, made a bundle of their possessions and put both into Tancrede's cart. Désiré slept. Impelled by a terrific activity she covered the ground quickly, in spite of the weight she had to push, and her lame foot. Her old skirt trailed in the dust ; her coat was green and threadbare in the morning sunshine ; her black eyes flashed beneath the brim of her battered old hat as she turned her head warily from side to side. Someone might be following her ! hidden in the deep ditch or on the other side of the fence, in the fields. . . . She strode along like a man, her clothes hanging loosely on her gaunt stooping frame.

At Trois Pistoles the church bell was ringing. She remembered that it was Sunday, and would have liked to go into the church and rest. But Désiré needed food, and she was afraid he might cry. She hoped she would not meet anyone she knew going to mass : they would ask questions

and she hated that. She tried to hurry, but her foot dragged.

[The Judge's wife and daughters were coming out of the red villa as she reached the door of *Mon Repos*. At first they did not recognise her. Then they hastened after her, to make up for their blank looks by kind speeches to the baby.

"We remember his mother so well, once at one of our little parties," they said in a kind little chorus. They looked wan, and smaller than ever: so like each other that they might have been three sisters. "She was so young and gay. We were very happy that night; now we are so sad." Leonie and Julia wiped their eyes and spoke of their father, who had been ill and could no longer enjoy his revolving summer-house.

"He admired your pretty niece, we remember. Your dear little boy looks well,—may he live long," Mme. Jonas said gently. "And what is the news of Mr. Ribot, the Judge's old friend?"

"I know little of him. The child is mine—I have adopted him." Alma spoke in a hard challenging tone.

"Ah, yes. You look tired. I would ask you in for a cup of tea but we are on our way to mass," Mme. Jonas said.

"You are good—but we must go on at once." Alma laid her hand on Leonie's arm and stared with wild dark eyes into her face.

"Your father is a good man, and death comes easily to the old—they welcome him. It is the young that we must try to keep with us—above all the children. It is a constant battle." Her

voice sank to a trembling whisper. Her aspect alarmed gentle little Miss Jonas, who was glad to hurry away.

“Poor creature,” she sighed. “It was tragic to lose her niece that she had brought up. I remember her devotion. So sad a story too. Julia, I am ashamed of my handkerchief. I must go back for another.”

“I have two clean ones. You may have one, Leonie. Quick, the bell has stopped ringing.”

CHAPTER TWELFTH.

(1)

THE years passed and the child though never robust was well enough. He was an odd, silent little boy, absorbed more and more as he grew older in solitary games of his own. He was docile and affectionate but not in any way demonstrative. Nor was Alma, after he had passed his baby days, although she scarcely let him out of her sight. Their companionship which seemed so unnatural to the village satisfied them both ; Désiré because he had never known anything else ; Alma because everything else she had known had brought her pain, while in this child joy was centred.

He was shy as a wild creature of strangers. She exulted in these traits that made him peculiarly hers. Lucie had been insatiable for companionship and for petting. Désiré liked to be left alone on the beach or in the woods, and even in the house ; in the manner of an ordinary child, he seldom asked for any notice or drew Alma's attention to what he was doing. An observant child, clever with his hands, he amused himself. He liked to have a pencil and a piece of paper and he would draw birds—first from the wooden ones carved by Ephrem, then from life. He would lie on his back in the woods, quite still, watching the

birds and squirrels. He cut out paper pictures of swallows in flight, and leaping squirrels. Tan-crède made all sorts of toys for him: a bow and arrows, a birch bark canoe, an Indian village, a fleet of boats, and a "real" toboggan for the winter. Tan-crède was almost the only visitor to the cottage, certainly the only welcome one. He was admitted to the kitchen now, occasionally, because Désiré looked upon him as a friend. Alma was not jealous of the Indian. She would sit contentedly watching him play with the child, his dark aquiline face and black head close to the small fair face that looked ethereal in contrast, his hands black with the dirt of ages deftly showing Désiré how to string a bow, or rig a ship, or twist the gut in a pair of snowshoes. He had never brought the boy ill-luck, and more and more she was influenced and guided by the superstition of luck.

Late on a winter afternoon they were all three together in the kitchen, the child and the Indian stretched, silent and absorbed, on the floor busy making a pair of small snowshoes; Alma seated at the table with her mending, her eyes, a grave smile in them, more often on the boy's fair head. The lamp in the middle of the table went suddenly low, smoked a moment, and went out.

Alma, exclaiming that she must have forgotten to fill it, lit a candle and examined the lamp. Nothing was wrong with the wick and there was plenty of oil; when lighted again the lamp burnt clearly and steadily. She grew cold with superstitious fear.

"It was a spirit passing through the room," Tancredè said placidly. "No harm this time."

"It must be for a warning," Alma whispered. "One of us three will meet with misfortune. Oh, I am terribly afraid."

Her haunted eyes sought the child.

"It may be me," Tancredè said consolingly.

"Let us hope so, but I am afraid. When a lamp is extinguished suddenly, without reason, it is a sign of coming trouble. I have only one fear. I care nothing about myself."

"You've no cause to worry. Your house is draughty," Tancredè said rising. "I'll be off, and if harm comes to me I'll let you know it to ease your mind. Don't look so wild or you'll do yourself an injury. Good-bye, my little fellow. I must go out and have an accident in the snow it seems, to save you from a mischief!"

"Don't have an accident, please, till you've finished making my other snowshoe," Désiré said calmly.

Alma, excited by the smallest incident that could be imagined supernatural, remained apprehensive for days, but nothing occurred to cause her alarm. Then Tancredè reappeared.

"Be calm. The warning was for me. An Indian child over at Le Plein has died; I knew he was ill. He was my son."

Alma gazed at him in silence.

"He was not an only child, after all is said—children are plentiful enough," Tancredè went on, philosophically. "His mother has enough without him, but a child is a child, and he was a bold little fellow."

“ Thank God the warning was for you.”

* Thank Him if it makes you feel more secure,” the Indian said without resentment. “ I am glad for you that it was not your little one. But even with plenty you wouldn’t choose them to go out like a candle. Yours is safe this time, Alma Lebel.” He shuffled off.

Alma felt relief and triumph. Whose child but hers mattered ?

(2)

With the years the sense of conflict increased. The periods when her mind was wholly at ease and the cloud lifted from her heart became more infrequent, though they could still blessedly occur. The danger that seemed to threaten the thing she loved had almost taken tangible form now. When the turmoil of fear beset her, she fancied that presences menaced her in the darkness ; she could feel the hostile force fighting against her will and purpose. No one but a mother could battle so for a child ; it was Lucie who struggled and was defeated.

At long intervals, taking Désiré with her, she walked to the village to provide herself with household necessities. The pair always attracted curious attention. Holding his hand tightly, turning her head incessantly to look about her as if the street were beset with perils, Alma hurried the child along.

“ Tiens, Alma ! The boy is growing,” an acquaintance would venture. “ Soon he’ll have to go to school.”

|She smiled with dry lips at such remarks, and

nodded her head with a brief greeting. Once as she passed she heard a woman say indignantly : “ Someone ought to take away the child from that mad, selfish old woman. It’s a wicked thing for him to be alone like that all his life ! ”

She turned over the words bitterly in her mind. She knew—she alone could know—that something dreadful would happen to Désiré if she didn’t take such good care of him. It was not easy as she had terrible things to contend with. She did it for the boy’s safety. He had no one else in the world, and her love protected him. Mad, selfish, old ! What terrible cruelty to say such things when she wished to harm no one. She was not mad ; she laughed at the thought of being old. She was strong, well able to go on with the battle. She would never give in. They wanted to take Désiré from her, as they had taken Lucie. They called her names to frighten her. But no one “ real ” could frighten her.

From time to time she left her house as abruptly as she had done when she spent the months at Côte-de-la-Misère, and found refuge for a few weeks in some old tumbledown dwelling. Then, as suddenly as she had gone, she would return again. Désiré made no demur when she seized him by the hand and took him off. He was used to her violence and he knew about the voices. Sometimes he admitted that he too heard them. One day when he was eating his dinner he said : “ If you will come with me I can show you a beautiful grey cross I have found in the woods. It’s a little cross just big enough for me.”

“What are you saying?” Alma asked sharply.

“You come out and see,” Désiré said, nodding sagely. “It is growing, my cross, that’s the funny part about it.”

“You talk nonsense,” Alma said frowning.

“Oh, no, it is real,” the boy said seriously.

He led her into the wood behind the house where a few white birches and young beech trees grew among the firs. After some search for a secret path of his own he made Alma kneel, so that she should be more nearly his height, and pointed in triumph down the vista. There, sure enough, against the dark background of firs and thick sweet cedar bushes, stood a slender grey cross. It was growing as Désiré had said, formed by the intertwining of the grey branches of three young birches, a trick of distance and light.

The Grey Cross! All her life Alma had heard of that warning too. And here it was before her eyes. She went cold for a moment, then she rushed forward and tore at the outspread branches, quickly destroying the illusion.

“You have spoilt my cross,” Désiré said sadly. “Next time I won’t show you.”

“There was no cross, my love, and we’ll light a fire with these branches,” Alma trembled as she stooped to pick them up.

She clasped the child to her heart, pressing his face yearningly against her lips: “I think our prayers are asked for. We will go this afternoon and kneel by the real cross. At once, now.”

She snatched his hand and hurried him off, leaving everything she had to do because a new

place of pilgrimage had suggested itself to her. His legs could scarcely keep up with her, she dragged him so fast along the road, but he was not accustomed to complain and struggled patiently beside her.

At the foot of the steep wooded road that led up to the cemetery, she slackened her pace and let go the child's hand. She must take hills slowly. Désiré sighed with relief. He had never been here before; a strange country in which he must look out sharply for new birds and beasts, and other exciting discoveries. As they followed the road that climbed, pretty directly, up the side of the hill, he was enchanted. More and more country spread out below, and wider and longer reaches of the great river. It was very exciting; but Alma, her beads slipping through her hands, her lips moving silently, seemed too absorbed to look at the new wonders; Desbien's windmill, Whirlpool Point, ships in the river, all spread magically before their eyes.

The burying-ground was on the top of the highest hill in the neighbourhood. The road, thickly wooded half-way up, ran out through scrub to a bare hillside. The level platform at the top, enclosed by a black tarred fence, cherished neither tree nor bush nor flower.

Alma took his hand, and they entered the strangest place Désiré had ever seen. In the centre of this bleak garden, on the highest point of the hill, an immense black wooden cross rose stark against the sky. Round it were clustered grassy mounds

nearly all marked by small weatherbeaten, unpainted wooden crosses. There was no other symbol. On some of the graves hung ghostly wreaths of everlasting.

Alma led him straight to the foot of the cross, and made him repeat his prayers with her. Then she let him wander about while she remained on her knees.

The village with the church and presbytery lay below. All round stretched miles and miles of hilly wooded country, fields, farms, white roads cutting into the concessions, fences, hedges, haystacks, the glorious blue river great as a sea, and white ships on its shining breast, and violet hills beyond. What a big world, Désiré thought, counting all the different things that he saw. The sun shone on it all, the sky glowed like a sapphire. Outside the black fence all was beautiful with brilliant light, green and blue and gold. But the sombre garden of crosses and withered wreaths, lying on mounds that looked like bolsters, was a displeasing place.

Some of the crosses had names on them. Désiré could spell them out, but he could not pronounce them without Alma's help, and he knew that he could not interrupt her at her prayers.

Presently she called him. He found her with the expression of composure and security, that made him snuggle into her arms with one of his infrequent gestures of love. She showed him the solid cross, painted white, that marked the resting-place of her father and mother, and an unpainted one close by, of grey flaking wood that bore the

three names, half obliterated, of Hercule, Hyacinthe and Narcisse, "three young men who were drowned."

"Their bodies are in the sea, but the cross reminds people to pray for their souls."

"Are their souls in the sea?" Désiré asked. "I would like that better than this garden, it is so black and ugly. They can look up at the ships and the gulls if they are in that blue water. I would like that."

"God forbid."

"My mother is not here?" Désiré said, looking about, still in the shelter of her arms.

"Not here. In Quebec."

Not Lucie, not P'tit Ange—but Alma would lie here some day. She kissed Désiré's fair head: he would not be beside her then; she knew that somehow.

Mad, selfish, old, they had said. For the first time she felt old—she had outlived so many.

(3)

If he lived till he was seven, she told herself, then she could hold him. There was power in the number itself. He would be stronger, better able to contend with life because he would then be a child of the church. Marie-Incarnation would teach him his catechism. Even now the omens of evil could be frustrated: the extinguished lamp, the grey cross in the wood. A bird that had fluttered down the chimney, a dead seagull that Désiré had picked up on the rocks, had not presaged disaster to him. If they had she had

been able to avert the evil. There was relief in the thought. She felt secure. Désiré nestled drowsily in her arms.

“I will always stay with you,” he murmured as if she had thought aloud.

CHAPTER THIRTEENTH.

(1)

JEAN Ribot, deprived of a wife, comfort, and more than that, as he dimly felt, of the one touch of romance in his long and prosaic life, lost no time in getting rid of his shop, and shaking off its recent associations. His house was painful to him and he fell into a melancholy state. When the summer came he went to stay with his brother, a farmer in the country, and there he met and married the sister of his sister-in-law. He now felt comfortable again, with a healthy, hearty woman of thirty-five, to look after him. As her determination to live in the country agreed with his decision not to go back to town, they looked about for a small farm. The new wife was the practical farmer of the two, but Jean could afford to employ a man to work for him, and it was good for his health to do what he could himself out of doors.

They made two or three false starts before they found what suited them exactly and were able to settle down. Mme. Ribot arranged the matter. She came from a family that had always farmed for the seigneurs of Le Chartrain, and when she knew that the family were looking for a superior and trustworthy man and wife to live on their farm and look after the place while they were

abroad—probably for a number of years—she lost no time in asking for the position. She obtained it. Nothing could have been better for Jean Ribot. He had his house and farm and enough occupation for his years and capacity; he had authority over the men who worked on the seigneurie and was responsible for the safety of the manor house.

In a position of some dignity, he found himself in good health and great content. His wife was buxom and cheerful. Several children were born in rapid succession. Their arrival occasioned no anxiety and scarcely disturbed the routine of the house. Much to his surprise Jean was fond of his children. From time to time he found his thoughts turning to his firstborn son, Lucie's child. He wondered if he resembled Lucie; if he had her vivid colouring, and bright dark eyes, or if, perhaps, he was sturdy and small and brown like his half-brothers and sisters. He had not wanted to hear anything about him at first, but now he thought he would like to see the boy. If anything happened to Alma it would naturally be his duty to look after him. It could do no harm to see how he was getting on.

The Seigneurie of Le Chartrain on a headland jutting far out on the opposite shore of the river, was not far from where Alma lived. On a fine day it was possible to row across in a couple of hours. Yachts sometimes sailed over and put in at Whirlpool Point, where there was a small pier.

Jean Ribot was in no great hurry. He thought that just possibly, one day before long,

he would find an opportunity of crossing the river to see if all went well with Lucie's little boy. He would take Zoe his wife, and one of the children ; it would be quite an expedition. He discussed it with his wife, and she was at once interested and sympathetic. Of course he must go and see his child ; and indeed, her children should know their half-brother. Jean had forgotten, if he had ever fully taken in the fact, that Alma did not want to see him again, lest Désiré might be interfered with in any way. He turned over matters in his slow mind. With Zoe to recall him to his duty, the idea gradually became an obligation. He began to think that Alma would welcome him.

(2)

Mme. Pradet was engaged in "making a good death." It was not imminent, although she was well advanced in years. But she was now helplessly fat and rheumatic, kept most of her days in her large feather-bed, and turned her mind to pious thoughts and good deeds.

She was surrounded by religious objects, had frequent visits from the curé and the nuns, and rejoiced to think that her house was a shrine of grace. Gone were her feathered hats, her creaking silks, her finery and gold chains ; but her shawls were gay, and the coverings of her mountainous bed of a most heartening brightness to the many visitors who came to be edified by her conversation.

Moise, as old as his wife, still kept the shop. Withered into a dry activity, he was assisted by a married niece and her husband who lived in the

house. Mme. Pradet from her room next the shop, could hear the customers come in and out.

She summoned such of them as were her special friends to have a chat with her. She was very severe with the men at night; checked their slow murmurous conversation when they burst into laughter over some joke that she felt must be unseemly, or used an expression forbidden by the catechism.

The shop as a meeting-place began to grow unpopular, and the men sheepishly shifted off to the post-office instead, regretting that Mme. Pradet's physical disabilities did not include deafness, so that her passage to heaven and their habits could alike have remained undisturbed. But her ears and her eyes were good still.

Her big bed was placed in such a position that she commanded a view of the street and was able to see a good deal of the village life. She kept herself informed of the current of worldly affairs, although she was no longer in it. There were times, of course, when her soul demanded to be let alone for a little, and she could then permit herself to take an interest in her neighbours. She saw Alma pass her window on a fine August day, leading the little boy by the hand as usual. Like the rest of the village, she stared at the pair, who were alike in nothing except their silence, a sort of shy wildness in their looks. Alma entered the shop, and Mme. Pradet hammered on the wall for her niece Seraphine.

“Tell Alma Lebel that I am not long for this world, and that I would be glad to speak to her

again before I am called," Mme. Pradet said impressively.

Seraphine looked submissive and delivered her message thus : " My aunt is very well to-day and it would be a kindness if you'd go in and speak to her. It gets dull in bed."

" I said no such thing ! I have something to say to Alma ! " Mme. Pradet called out, not having heard Seraphine exactly but experienced enough to know that she would not repeat her words. " Alma, I would be glad to see you, and the little one."

Alma hesitated, but as Seraphine had opened the communicating door she advanced a few steps and stood looking uncertainly at the occupant of the bed.

" It is a long time since I have seen you, Alma, and the little one. Come in, and shut the door."

" You are not suffering ? You look very well," Alma said, in her deep, abrupt voice.

" I am very well spiritually. My body is finished," Mme. Pradet said a trifle impatiently. " You are remarkable, Alma, with your hair still as black as ever ! And the child ? Come and kiss me."

Désiré, encouraged by Alma, stood beside the bed on tiptoe. Mme. Pradet leaned over, but even so they could not embrace till Alma lifted the little boy up. Having been kissed, he hung his head, overcome by shyness, and clung tightly to Alma.

" It must be a great trial—a child to mind at your age," Mme. Pradet said disapprovingly.

“ You do not know me if you think so. I have no other pleasure,” Alma said.

“ Let me see—you must be sixty-five years of age,” Mme. Pradet said reflectively.

“ I am not yet sixty,” Alma said, a flicker that might have been amusement, since it was not resentful, coming into her eyes. “ I am still strong enough too.”

“ You cannot count on that. Listen to me, Alma—I have only your interest in mind when I speak. I am too near the portals of the other world to waste my time in this. You are doing a great wrong to that child, by shutting him away as you do. It is your duty to send him to board at the new infant school, where he would have every care and suitable companionship. He is of an age to have proper Christian instruction too. Eight years old at least.”

“ Six,” said Alma.

“ Six, then. I am interested in the infant school. I give largely to it. They would take any child in that I recommend. I hope you will not act selfishly in this, Alma. It is selfish to keep the little one from companions of his own age and it is a crime against the church to neglect his soul.”

Alma smiled faintly.

“ The soul of a child doesn't require too much handling. We may leave our own dirty fingerprints on it. Concern yourself with your own soul, Berthe Pradet. It has lived a long, selfish, greedy life.”

“ I refuse to become angry. May God forgive

you for your injustice," Mme. Pradet, crimson, fingered her beads, and turned her eyes piously towards a coloured picture called "The Saint's Death-bed."

"I called you in out of kindness because I am sorry—like all the village—to see you so obstinate, and the child so lonely. I desired to recall you to a sense of duty. But it is useless."

The smile still lingered in Alma's sad eyes.

"You must not let me distress your last days," she said gently. "You have done your best, and I do my best."

"But I know better than you," Mme. Pradet said angrily. "It is my duty to tell you that you are selfish and wicked, even cruel, in regard to that child."

"You have done your duty then. You always enjoyed it when it meant interference. I wish you a comfortable death and not too hard a purgatory. But may it be long delayed. You look good for a long time yet," Alma said.

"My conscience is relieved at least," Mme. Pradet said with satisfaction. "I was going to say to you that if you chose to send the boy to school it would cost you nothing. I would be responsible."

"He stays with me. Come, Désiré."

Alma turned over Mme. Pradet's strictures in her mind as she went home, and they began to assume the proportions of an accusation. She couldn't give him up to anyone. She knew best, after all. She *knew!*

There seemed a conspiracy against her peace

of mind that day. Old Madame Dufour, leading two of her grandchildren—Romeo's children—by the hand, stopped her to compare their height with Désiré, and gave a chuckle of pride because, though younger, they were bigger and stronger.

"They must all go to school together soon, and learn to be friends," she said in her high, quavering voice. "They're not so precious as yours, Alma Lebel, because Romeo has a houseful! Blanche has her time well occupied, I can tell you. But there's no use making too much of one child, for in that case you're apt to lose it."

The next person to stop her was Toinette Blondeau. Plumper and more matronly than ever, she knelt down in the roadway to embrace Désiré with such genuine sweetness and affection that Alma was touched and lingered a moment.

"But he is fragile, the little fellow. Let him come some day to play with my chickens. That will do him good," Toinette said, kissing him. "He looks too solemn for six years old—eh, my pretty? He needs play. Will you bring him some day?"

"Yes," Alma said, hesitating. With her sense of conferring a favour in allowing any kindness to Désiré, she added, "For you, Toinette, I will promise that—some day!"

She hurried the child on.

(3)

She returned from this excursion brooding bitterly over public opinion that condemned her devotion, her care. "Something would happen,"

if she were less careful. Désiré was not like other children; she knew that too well.

She found the cottage occupied. The door was never locked when she went to the village to do her bits of shopping, and someone had discovered that. A man, a woman and a child sat in the kitchen.

Désiré hung back alarmed. Alma, a flame of anger kindling her cheeks, strode forward to demand an explanation.

She did not recognise Lucie's former husband, and had never heard of his second marriage.

"How dare you enter my house—be off!" she said harshly. As the man came forward she saw that it was Jean Ribot. She spoke defensively at once, her mind tormented by anxiety.

"Why have you come? The child is mine, you remember?"

The father deprecated any desire to take the boy.

"It was just to see him. To see if he resembled his mother in any way, and to ask how you are getting on," he said, immediately disillusioned as to any desire on Alma's part to welcome him. "It was a natural wish to see him."

His smiling motherly wife drew her own little son forward and said proudly, "We have four."

She explained how near they lived, how Jean was farmer now at the Seigneurie Le Chartrain. They had plenty of room in their well-built, comfortable farm-house; they wanted Alma to come and stay with them and bring the boy for a little visit.

Zoe was affectionate and warm-hearted; her

kind eyes and lips smiled as she tried to persuade Alma. She abruptly refused.

Désiré crept in, leaned against her knee and listened, watching his little half-brother with shy interest.

Jean Ribot, accustomed to a noisy and healthy troop, was disturbed by the delicacy and silence of the child.

“Well if you won’t come yourself let us have the boy for a few days at least,” he said, interrupting his wife’s coaxing tones. “He looks sick and he must need children to play with.”

“He needs nothing. He is quite happy with me,” Alma cried fiercely. “And he is well. You don’t want to go away from me, my treasure?”

They all gazed at the little boy, who considered the strange people, seriously, but without his usual shyness.

“I should like to go.” He leaned against Alma and spoke confidently and sweetly. She always gave him what he wanted, and he was completely loving as he looked at her.

Mme. Ribot threw her capacious, motherly arms round him and kissed him heartily.

“If you’ll trust him to us he shall have greater care than my own children,” she said, laying a kind reassuring hand on Alma’s knee.

“It shall be just exactly as you say, however,” Jean Ribot said. “If you will come with him, all the better. If you will let him come without you, and fetch him back yourself in a day or two, we shall be glad even of that. But if you say no to both suggestions there is no more to be said. The

child is yours. I have no wish to go back on my word, or to interfere in any way. We have seen him now and we will return as we came."

The two children had drawn together and were now outside on the doorstep. Suddenly Désiré burst into a peal of laughter, so free and childish that it made them all smile.

Alma walked restlessly about the room. Of late she had known a measure of peace; at such periods the obsession that normally possessed her faded so much that it was difficult to believe that her old terrors could ever return. Her dread of hostile presences in the dark, the sense of a will conflicting with hers to the child's undoing, had left her. Perhaps Lucie was at last satisfied that she was doing well for the child. . . . Unhappy; she paced the room. Perhaps his life was lonely; Mme. Pradet, Mme. Dufour, Toinette had said so, all in that one day! Was this a sign—something she must obey?

The kind pleasant face of the stepmother, her eyes watching her with tenderness, inspired confidence.

"He shall go," she said, sighing. She held the child and gazed into his face.

"You want to go away from me for a little? You won't be lonely, my little bird?"

Désiré, bubbling with laughter after some childish game with Léon, said at once, "I want to go. Yes, yes." Alma released him.

"He shall go," she repeated. "This is Thursday. On Monday I shall come for him."

She heard her own voice as if she spoke in a

dream. She found herself putting some of the child's things into a parcel, scarcely believing that she was letting him go from her. Someone else seemed to be acting through her, while in the background of consciousness her own personality looked on effortless and compelled.

She held Désiré in her arms, and pressed her face to his. The dreamlike unreality persisted. She went with them down the cliff path, but did not cross the fields to the beach.

She saw the figures silhouetted against the yellowing western horizon ; she heard the children's voices, Désiré's eager and happy. They shouted when the boat was pushed over the sand into the water. The dip of the oars reached her ears.

CHAPTER FOURTEENTH

(1)

SHE went into the house and sat down in the extraordinary quietness. Through the years the house had emptied and filled. Now it was empty again ; not only because the child was gone, she thought curiously, but because the haunting presences and voices had vanished too. They no longer lurked ready to destroy her calm. They had ceased to exist. Emptiness. No opposing forces ; peace that held her immovable. Quietness. A world empty of sound.

Dusk fell, and darkness. She sat staring before her all night long.

The two following days passed in the same strange tranquillity, unbroken by any outward event, any hidden doubt. She went quietly about her work, not unhappy or impatient for the child, conscious only of stillness lying like dew on her spirit. She walked in the wood and saw no grey cross among the straight young birches. She felt delivered from evil.

The August night fell sweet and fresh. She sat on her door-step, her hands loosely clasped on her knees, and watched the red harvest moon swing up over the river, turn to orange and to gold. She sat with her head against the doorway, her eyes

vague with beauty, as she had sat, when she was a girl, dreaming of her future. Now dreams and concrete images were blotted out; there was only light and silence and utter content. She slept and woke again to calm, and passed a second day as dream-like as the first.

(2)

On Sunday morning she woke early, passing in an instant from unconsciousness to turmoil; an agony of restless fear closing blackly upon her; apprehension of calamity so fierce in her heart that she trembled. She rose and dressed, let each thing she touched fall from her shaking hands, groped blindly for what was close to her. She was starving for sight and touch of the child. She wanted to go for him at once. Why had she ever consented to let them take him away from her?

She must hurry, hurry. How soon could she assure herself that he was safe? If she could clasp him to her again she would never let him go! The house was full of whispers and laughter—they were mocking at her for a fool.

At last, dressed somehow, she set off, through the fields and down the cliff, to get a boatman who would row her across to Le Chartrain. She would try and persuade Tancrède Bienvenu first, and if he refused to take her, there was old Pierre Jacquart, who would grumble but who couldn't resist the offer of a dollar or two.

She found Tancrède cooking some mess in a pot at the door of his shack. He was dressed in his

Sunday shirt which he put on once a year. He told her that he intended to go to mass ; he had promised himself for a long time to go to church this Sunday. Meantime he was having his breakfast.

“ Have some, my girl ? Stewed fish and potatoes and very good,” he said, flourishing a wooden ladle.

“ You must come at once, Tancredi ! I have to go to Le Chartrain for the little one. You have a boat—you must row me over. Come at once—I can’t wait,” Alma said.

He laughed at first ; but the urgency and wildness of her appeal induced him to promise to take her across the river.

“ But not in my best shirt, and not before I have eaten,” he said obstinately. “ There is no one else I would miss mass for, Alma Lebel, once I had made my mind up to go ! ”

He began to shovel the contents of the pot into his mouth ; she turned away and sat down on the sand at the edge of the water.

Tancredi finished his meal and lit his pipe. Grumbling, he removed the pot, took it into the hut. He took his time about changing into his working clothes, reflecting that Alma Lebel was certainly madder than ever, and getting to look like an old woman at last. He had known her a long time, and she could always make him work for her ! She had let the child go off with those people two days ago, and of course she missed him, the poor old creature with no ideas in her head except that little boy. At last he was ready ; he bent himself to shove his heavy flat-bottomed boat into the water.

“Come along, then. We won’t move so very fast, but it will always be a pleasant excursion on a fine Sunday morning. They’ll think I’m out with my *blonde*! In you get, my girl!”

Alma did not speak. She crouched down in the bow of the boat, her eyes fixed intently on the line of the opposite shore, dim in the haze of an early morning of excessive heat. Sometimes she muttered to herself and flung out her hands with the gesture of one who pushes back a crushing weight.

“You’ll be glad to see the boy again,” Tancrediè said, conversationally. “I’ve got a fine little canoe I’m making for him, paddles and all complete. He’ll be delighted when he sees it. So it’s his father he’s gone to visit? Don’t look so scared, my good creature. No harm will happen to him.”

Alma paid no attention. She sat huddled up, rigid, staring across the water.

Tancrediè spat on his hands and moved his ponderous, creaking oars steadily but slowly. He was not getting any younger either as time advanced, but no one knew—himself least of all—how old he actually was. He looked at his passenger with shrewd eyes. If she was as wild as all this just because the child was with his father for the night, a real trouble would send her quite off her head. The curé would have to see her and she would undoubtedly require to be looked after before very long.

It was a shining summer morning of still heat, increasing moment by moment as the sun rose

higher. The blue water, smooth as glass, was, on the surface, warm to the touch ; so clear that it might have been a shallow lake instead of the mighty river. The deep blue sky paled to pearl colour at the horizon ; haze, finer than a curtain of spun glass, quivered between the beach they had left and the water. The silence was scarcely broken by the creak and slip of the oars. Far off there was the sound of the church bell. A gull, winging breast aslant, uttered a cry, as it crossed their boat, and the Indian saw Alma shiver.

Their course was quite direct ; but it was very hot on the river, and the distance was covered slowly by Tancredi's rowing. When he paused to shift his oars and rest, Alma cast him a despairing glance but said no word.

The high green point, on which the Seigneurie of Le Chartrain stood, grew steadily nearer. Presently the old French manor became visible, white and square, with its green shuttered windows ; then the steep cliff of fine trees, and the curve of the yellow beach below, shimmering in the heat that played over the surface of the water.

(3)

Suddenly Alma rose to her feet with such violence that the boat, heavy and square as it was, nearly upset. She shrieked with so piercing and wild an anguish in her voice that the Indian felt himself grow cold.

“ Oh, what is that ? ” she screamed, pointing to the shore. “ What is it ? Lucie ! Lucie ! Lucie ! ”

Tançrède shouted to her to sit down, lunging at her with an oar because he thought she had become dangerously mad. She sank down in the bottom of the boat.

Near the shore a man stood almost up to the neck in the water, moving his arms about under it as if he were feeling for something. As the boat came near he began to wade towards the shore.

“Nothing wonderful to see, Alma Lebel,” grumbled Tançrède. “A man can bathe if he has the fancy for it, I suppose.”

The man was oddly attired for bathing in his black Sunday clothes and a white shirt. Alma saw it was Jean Ribot.

A little group of women stood on the shore watching him, silent, held in a sort of sad fatality. One carried a baby and a little boy clutched her skirt. An old woman held the man’s black coat over her arm, and a small yellow dog, harnessed to a toy cart whined anxiously at the brink of the water.

“What is it—what has happened?” shouted Tançrède.

The man in the water called back, “My little boy is drowned.”

Bent almost double, he waded out. The old woman hurried towards him with exclamations, and tried to throw his coat over his dripping shoulders. He let it fall and she moved it away from the stream of water that ran from him.

Jean Ribot’s wife, handing her baby to another woman, helped Alma out of the boat. When she put her arms round her a shudder went through

Alma and she made a convulsive sound. Tears streamed down Zoe's cheeks and she could not speak till Alma's dumbness gave her courage.

"Oh, what can I say to you—*Désiré*—your little one—lost," she wept. "We promised—such care—we can't tell how it happened. An accident—but it is so safe, so shallow here—he was playing with *Léon*."

She spoke choked with sobs, fondling Alma's unresponsive hands and looking into her blank eyes. "An accident here has never been known before."

Jean Ribot related to *Tancrede* less briefly what had happened. The children had been playing together, wading and splashing in the warm water at the edge, and *Désiré* had ventured further out than the three-year-old *Léon*, who ran up and down the sand with the dog and the toy cart. *Désiré* had been wading, laughing and shouting—he was such a gay little fellow with other children—and presently when *Léon* looked round, he had disappeared. The little boy thought it was play, and waited. He amused himself with the dog. They thought that perhaps half an hour had passed before he grew frightened and ran up to the house to tell his mother what had happened. They had rushed down but the tide was coming in, and shallow as it was they could not find the body. . . .

The water was as smooth as oil, but unluckily it was thick and muddy near the shore. All the other men were away at church. He and the women had done what they could, but certainly the child's life was lost. It was a most mysterious

thing; they could not understand it at all. His children played safely on that beach. . . . They could never forgive themselves.

Jean Ribot, looking stricken, came up to Alma and said in despair:

“What have I done to you? I took him away. I can never forgive myself.”

“It was not you. No one blames you,” Alma said in a lifeless voice.

“I think God has lost His head this time—to do such a thing to a woman like you, Alma Lebel,” Tancredi muttered.

“It was not God,” Alma said. She looked round her at the bright empty world and fixed her blank eyes on the river, shining and still as glass.

“His mother has taken him,” she said.

(4)

They led her up to the house, Zoe murmuring heartbrokenly, chafing her hands. She moved obediently and sat down in the chair they placed for her. She heard everything that was said around her, but it was all quite unreal. She took no part in the meaningless talk.

“No use to look any more now,” Tancredi grunted. “When the tide falls we may find the child. If we don’t his body must have been carried into mid-stream, and it is doubtful if it will ever be recovered. It may, though—quite likely miles away from here. The dead travel long distances sometimes.” He took a gulp of raw spirit. “He was a nice little fellow, and he liked me,” he said proudly.

"We must pray," said the old woman, agitated by some feeble emotion but too old to feel the shocks of life any more. She patted the sleeping baby on her knee, and rocked gently backwards and forwards in the big chair, its black fan-shaped back spreading behind her head.

"You won't blame my little Léon; he is only a baby, only three years! Blame me," wept Zoe, caressing Alma's shoulder as if she soothed the grief of one of her children.

Jean Ribot who had been upstairs to change his wet clothes came into the room and sat looking miserably at the floor.

"He was my eldest son, after all," he said, "but of course it is not on me that the loss falls. He was happy here too, with the others—a good little fellow."

"I never thought he was for long," Tançrède volunteered. "He hadn't a common child's strength. I saw him often. He liked me," he boasted.

"We can always pray," the old woman muttered many times over, becoming sleepy herself as she rocked the infant.

"I am going down to the shore again. I'd rather be there—it seems only right somehow," Jean Ribot said, rising restlessly.

Tançrède got up too, and held his pipe in his hand as he looked in a puzzled way at the silent woman who submitted to Zoe's soothing motions as if unconscious of her touch.

"Drowning is quite painless, Alma Lebel," he said, stooping close to her, and raising his

voice as though she had suddenly gone deaf. "It is a better way to go than most—you must be glad of that."

The two men went out.

(5)

When the tide ebbed Tancrède found the child's body caught between two boulders, his foot twisted under one of the stones. His face was untroubled, and his blue eyes were half open as if he were waking from sleep. The Indian carried him in to Alma.

She turned away with no sign of either love or grief.

"He does not belong to me. He has never been mine," she explained indifferently. "I tried to think he was, once."

Her face changed, and she blazed into feeling, her eyes alive again, as if a light, dying, had suddenly flared up for an instant. There was full defeat in her voice, though it was scarcely audible to those in the room as she spoke to no earthly ears.

"Now he is altogether yours, Lucie. You wanted him always, and you have taken him. You can leave me in peace at last."

She turned to Tancrède.

"Who are all these people? Did we come here in a boat? You had better take me home again. It will be getting dark soon."

PART IV
ALMA

CHAPTER FIFTEENTH

(1)

THE strawberry pickers came straggling along the road in the hot July sun, laden with baskets and small wooden buckets full of fruit carefully covered from the dust with fern and maple leaves. They looked important and satisfied, as if they had found all that they could carry ; a little tired too, because a long day's work lay behind them, though it was scarcely midday. They had been up at dawn and had walked some miles before they had found the place where the wild strawberries were so plentiful that they could sit down and pick them in a circle, almost filling a pail before they had to move on ; each child, even the smallest, sternly determined to pick more than her neighbour.

There were half a dozen little girls in faded print dresses, their tight pigtailed, escaping from beneath their shady straw hats, hanging over their thin little shoulders ; three small boys, hatless, their hair bleached white with the sun, and following at a little distance, an old woman who carried a bunch of wild flowers in one hand, and a basket covered with leaves in the other. She seemed in the manner of old country-women who pick up a living by the roadside, to have on all the clothes

in her possession, an odd collection at that; a pair of heavy, man's boots, a man's old overcoat reaching to her ankles, and on top of that a black coat. A wide coarse black straw hat was tied under her chin with two old bits of leather. Her wrinkled face was the colour of mahogany from wind and sun. Evidently poor and solitary, her expression was vivid and half smiling, as if she carried some secret gaiety inside the tumbled old body, and her bright dark eyes roamed about and fell tenderly on the children as if they found the world a pleasant place. Though she limped and was bent beneath her coats there was an air of vigour about her.

The children did not pay her much attention. Sometimes two or more would run back and get her to carry their pails of strawberries while they swarmed up a wild cherry tree and broke off branches or dipped their hot faces in a long wooden trough, full of water, fed by a roadside spring. When they took back their booty, their thanks were perfunctory; they accepted her presence as something completely familiar. A small boy tripped and spilt half the contents of his bucket in the dust. The old woman picked him up first, then knelt down and helped to gather up the least dusty strawberries. He took this as a matter of course, but when the old woman would have filled up his pail from her own basket, an older sister drew him away and said firmly, shaking her head to emphasize her words, "No thank you—he doesn't want any more."

"Now I wonder why that was," observed an

interested spectator who was sitting on the verandah of Dufour's boarding-house. "Joan, here come the children with wild strawberries," she called to her sister in the house. "Madame told me they had gone off early this morning, and they seem to have brought back plenty. Come and see them—we might buy a few."

The little Blondeaus and the little Dufours solemnly ranged themselves in a row in front of the verandah on which half a dozen English ladies were gossiping, and displayed the results of their expedition. A self-possessed young person with flaxen pig-tails and wearing small gold ear-rings announced modestly that their prices were ten cents a small pail, fifteen cents a larger pail, and twenty-five cents a large basket.

"But Ti Loup will sell his for five cents," she said in a positive tone, dragging forward a shy little brother, "because he has lost some of them in the road and a few are dusty."

"Why did you not let the old woman fill up his pail from her basket?" the English visitor asked, amused by the little habitant children.

The child hesitated a moment and glanced to see if the old woman, lingering across the road as if she feared to interrupt their sale, were near enough to hear.

"That is Old Alma. You see she doesn't quite know what she is doing," the child said, "and she picks all sort of things besides strawberries. So of course that would not do for us. These are nice fresh strawberries, quite clean—no caterpillars," she added, with a quaint air of business. "And

such big ones—we have never found better in our lives.”

“ But Old Alma does not pick caterpillars ? ”

“ Oh, certainly not,” the child returned sedately, not at all amused by English attempts at a joke. “ But cranberries and pigeonberries and *pinbina* are not good mixed with strawberries. But she knows no better.”

“ I shall buy Ti Loup’s for ten cents,” one of the ladies said.

“ Oh, no—five,” the little girl protested. “ Because you see if you give *him* ten we would have to ask more than that, as ours are better.”

They drove their small bargains and went off, satisfied, to dispose of the rest of their wares at the next house.

(2)

When they had gone the old woman approached, holding out her flowers and her basket with her odd, smiling expression, as the Englishwoman, whose sister had called her Joan, came out on the verandah. She was an old patron of Dufour’s, having spent some twenty summers there, and was quite excited at recognising Alma Lebel.

“ How interesting,” she said, in a hurried aside. “ I used to know all about her, but I have not seen her for years. She actually owns a house in Trois Pistoles you know, but she hardly ever lives in it, they say. She wanders about all over the country. No, she has no relations at all—rather a sad history, but I can hardly remember it. I am glad to see you, Alma,” she said kindly. “ What have you to sell ? ”

"Flowers," said Alma, holding them out with her look of secret gaiety.

"How pretty—and what else?" the English lady asked, in the accent of one who coaxes a child.

"Strawberries, blueberries, and a few raspberries, though it is so early," Alma said, displaying, from beneath the green leaves, the contents of her basket: an odd mixture of fruit and flowers arranged with a certain taste for colour and effect but not of much use, as the flowers were plucked off by the head and most of the fruit was unripe. She herself looked at them admiringly.

"I will buy them all. How much will that be?"

Alma looked vague. "Nothing. They don't come out of my garden, I pick them in the fields, so they cost me nothing."

"But I must pay you something for your trouble."

"It is no trouble; it is what I like. I always find the children when they are off looking for fruit, and I stay with them. They are not afraid of me because I am accustomed to children at home—P'tit Ange and the boys. And all the others," she added uncertainly.

"Where do you live now? I haven't seen you for a very long time."

"At home," Alma smiled.

"But not in the house on the hill that you used to live in?"

The old woman said abruptly, "You ask too many questions."

"Her things are never worth buying," Mme.

Romeo Dufour, coming out to the door and staring coldly at the old woman, intervened. "But one likes to help the poor, of course. She sleeps in the fields half the year I believe. Give her a quarter for the lot—that will keep her for a month!"

Mme. Romeo was very pleased that others should help the poor.

"I have a house of my own, remember," Alma said quickly. "But I don't ask you to it. I never liked any Dufours—I always tell Lucie so."

"Cracked!" said Romeo's wife, and retired within.

Alma, diving beneath her coats, found a pocket in her petticoat into which she slipped the money given to her. She picked up her basket.

"When I come back I will bring you more flowers," she said. "I like the English—except for one thing! You must not try to persuade Lucie to go to Quebec if you see her. She is better here with the other children—after all she is only ten years old. I can't be left alone either—I am sure you understand that." She nodded and smiled and moved slowly off.

Young Mme. Dufour—not so young now, but graced by the term as old Madame was still alive—reappeared with her youngest in her arms, and gazed after her.

"Did you ever hear the like? She has been alone and tramping the countryside for years, but if she talks at all she goes on as if all her relations were alive. She ought to be shut up, but nobody can keep her. She is always after the children,

and I for one don't like it. The first we ever hear of her is in the summer when the little ones go off to search for berries. She always seems to know where they will go, and there they find her."

"But they are not afraid of her—she never hurts them?"

"Oh, no, I'll say that," Mme. Romeo said grudgingly. "Often she doesn't speak to them at all, except to show them where the most strawberries are. The children don't mind her, but one never knows with those cracked brains."

"Poor old woman!"

"She was queer for years—all the family were a little touched it seems, but it was the loss of a child she was bringing up that sent her off her head. A great-nephew I believe. She has never done a stroke of work since. She just walks about the country through half a dozen parishes or more, pretending to sell flowers, and naturally people are charitable," Mme. Romeo said virtuously. "It was a lucky thing for the little boy that he was drowned, in my opinion—it saved him from growing up cracked too."

"It seems dreadful to think of her out all the winter," the English woman said shivering. "I don't know how she exists in this terrible climate."

"Oh, she goes into the little *cabanes* in the woods that the foresters build, or perhaps she finds a sugaring shack, or some little enclosure. Very often she spends a night in the church too, wherever she happens to be. We don't close our churches as the Protestants do, and many a tramp is saved from death on a cold night by sleeping in a warm

corner," young Mme. Dufour explained kindly, speaking as if all the charities of the churches and the hospitality of the woodsmen's shacks were due to her personal goodness.

"But an old woman like that—it seems too dreadful."

"Well, the nuns have offered to give her a home, and so did a woman in this very village—Mme. Blondeau, who has an enormous family, I can tell you! But no one can keep her. She is always talking of 'the children'—meaning her sister and her children we suppose, since she was never married herself—and going off to look for them. She says she can't live in her house here till they all come back. There is not much house to live in now. It is falling to pieces. But what I came out to say was," said Mme. Romeo suddenly turning business-like, "that there will be plenty of hot water to-night, if any of the ladies wish to have a bath?"

(3)

The child with the flaxen pigtails and the gold ear-rings was one of Toinette Ravary's famous brood, as, of course, was her small brother, Ti Loup—so nicknamed, according to his mother, because he had passed his infancy howling and ravening like a wolf.

Having disposed of all their strawberries, they went home to dinner very well pleased with themselves, and reported that Old Alma was in the village. They often saw her when they were off on their expeditions, but she rarely came to the village now, and Toinette was eager to see her.

“Run then, Pauline, and bring her back to dinner,” she commanded.

Though Alma came in with a hesitating air, she knew that these were her friends, and was sometimes quite clear as to Toinette’s old connection with her. She ate her dinner in silence, looking at the children with that friendly secret brightness that made them accept her without alarm, as if she were part of the landscape, when they met her unexpectedly in the woods, but which was so strange to their mother. She had been terrified of Alma as a little girl, and later on when she had tried to help her with Désiré. When she looked at this friendly old woman, although Alma still preserved a certain remoteness, she could scarcely recall the harsh, forbidding figure of the old days.

“I am sorry that Toiniche and Marcelle are away. You would like to see how big they have grown—seventeen years old now,” Toinette said, keeping up a pretence that Alma was specially interested in the twins who had been the same age as Désiré. “They are both in service, and doing very well.”

“I hope they won’t speak to Lucie about it,” Alma said, frowning.

Toinette hastened to say soothingly that they would not. Alma’s expression became serene again.

It was extraordinary that she could look so contented, now that she had nothing left, Toinette thought.

“I wish you would stay a little with us,” she said coaxingly, when dinner was over. “There

is room, although we are so many. Stay one night at least ? ”

“ I could not do that because no one would know where I was,” Alma said. “ And that would cause great trouble naturally. You are getting older, Toinette, and it seems strange. Lucie has not changed at all. She is still a little girl.”

“ Yes,” Toinette said gently.

“ But you see her often, of course.” Alma laughed at herself. “ She is always running away to see you I know. But they are all coming back before long. It will be gay in my house then.”

“ You haven’t forgotten the little boy ? ” Toinette asked, wondering that she never spoke his name and not venturing to name him herself.

“ Oh, not very likely. He lives with Tancredi on the beach. They are great friends,” Alma said. She got up, shook out her clothes, and retied the strings of her hat.

“ You will come to dinner with me some day, and bring all the children,” she invited in a grand manner. “ I can’t stay any longer now—I have a long way to go.”

She turned, went up the road towards the church, then down the hill to the shore, and walked along the sand till, in some vague fashion, she recognised the beach below her own cottage. She found a path up the cliff with great difficulty, through a tangle of undergrowth and scrubby little firs that were dead half-way up, their rusty-coloured branches twisted together with long spirals of grey moss that hung down and caught in her hat and her hair. She struggled through and reached

a clearer path near the top, the remains of their own old road. Here she sat and rested, and removed the moss from her hair and dress.

She emerged into Joe Bernard's prosperous fields and crossed into the road.

Her house still stood on the bleak little hill, and at long intervals she would come and occupy it for a few days.

A curl of smoke from the chimney announced to passers-by that she was there. Even if she had been willing to let or sell the house no one would have taken it as a gift : it had a sinister reputation ; it was not lucky ; there was something very odd about it. Children said it was haunted, and ran past it. The bigger and braver ones, peeping in at keyholes and cracks in the shutters, had long ago discovered that it was almost empty. Once it had been broken into by a tramp, and robbed. It was suspected that when its rightful owner occupied it she used the furniture for fuel, and carried off small objects to sell.

She looked at the house with excitement, mystery in her expression. It contained a secret, and its outward air of desolation and desertion did not strike her. The hill was steeper than she remembered as she limped up, casting cautious glances over her shoulder to see that she was not observed. No one was in sight.

Somewhere about her person, tied to her waist by a long string, she carried the key of the kitchen door. She searched under her garments, found it, and opened the door. This she shut and locked after her, then looked about, triumphant but still

cautious, and moved very quietly across the floor. It was closely-shuttered, dark and chill inside; the decaying roof had year by year shed flakes upon the floor till there was an inch or two of rubbish underfoot, and on the rusty stove, on the table and the one remaining chair. The black wooden temperance cross, nailed to the wall, had warped and hung distorted.

She looked into the room that had been Ephrem's.

"No one," she muttered. She went up the stairs and into each room, satisfying herself that the house was empty, her face clouded a little. "They have not come back yet," she said sighing.

Remembering a duty, she went back to Ephrem's room, and knelt to dust the coffin that had waited for an occupant for a long time now, and still waited.

(4)

Sometimes she stayed for a few days, leaving again as soon as she became restless; but to-day she would not stay. She locked the door after her, and was joyful to find herself in the hot sunlight again. Of course no one would remain in in such weather—certainly children wouldn't. They were off in the fields or the woods and she had been a fool to expect to find them here. She would come back at a more likely time.

She put the key laboriously back where she always carried it, shook herself out, and went slowly away, taking the road that led to the hills behind Trois Pistoles. She walked through a gay, busy world of vivid colour and warmth, her serenity

unclouded. The air was full of the sound of grasshoppers and birds, The world seemed to her a happy place. Of course she had a long way to go, she knew that always, but everything was very beautiful. She picked flowers by the roadside, stopped to eat strawberries growing in the ditches, and was content. She would sleep in a hayfield, close to a hedge where it was warm, as soon as she was sleepy. She liked best the summer nights, because it was so easy to find a place to sleep. Though she hated a roof over her, she crept into barns when it rained very hard. There had been some dreadful days, long ago, when they had kept her in a convent dormitory, with people all round her . . . but they had let her out at last. She was careful to keep away from convents, and indeed from all houses now. The summer air was sweet on her face, and a warmth of happiness pervaded her. "She had a long way to go, and she must look for the children"; these two ideas possessed her mind persistently; kept her roaming about the countryside, a familiar figure in half a dozen parishes, not only in the villages but to the dwellers in the lonely farmhouses set far back in the concessions. She kept always to her own side of the river, never crossing it. The sight of a boat distressed her in some remote, painful way, and she rarely went to the beach. Some elusive purpose drove her forward; as long as she was trudging along the roads she was content and felt that she was on the way to accomplishment.

She met with a great deal of charity everywhere. No one objected when she slept in barns, nor when

she milked the cows, as she often did, into a tin mug she carried.

They laughed. "Old Alma has been here I see, the poor creature! They say she was a fine woman once!"

CHAPTER SIXTEENTH

(1)

THE years passed in their ordered procession ; slowly for the little Blondeaus and Dufours and Bérubés who were at the beginning of life ; more swiftly for their brothers and sisters growing up to the age of love and disquiet ; too swiftly for their fathers and mothers, who found each day so short ; slower again for the old people sitting with folded hands, waiting, just waiting till they were “ no longer of time.”

For Alma, who could not any more reckon time, who knew little of seasons except that the hot summer sun pleased her best, the years turned slowly. She began to find all roads heavy underfoot and all hills very steep ; it was hard to keep warm enough or dry enough, and all distances became long. She was not seen much about the roads now. Only on rare occasions the children, roaming far afield, came across her. Sometimes a woodsman, descending from the hills into the village, would report that he had seen her sheltering in some hut in the woods, “ as crooked as a witch, as tattered as you please, and with no more sense in her at all.”

She would keep in one neighbourhood for months, hiding in the hills. When she went into a village

she made herself something of a nuisance, tossing about the hay in the barns for a bed, milking the cows, helping herself to eggs and fruit, sometimes to a loaf out of the outside oven. People began to grumble and to call their children away when she approached. She was Old Alma now in very truth ; they couldn't say how old, a hundred years perhaps, they told the children.

It was years since she had been back to Trois Pistoles, and she was almost forgotten there.

Now came an extravagant year, following on a winter of unprecedented mildness ; a spring of wild wind and floods of rain gave way with suddenness to a summer of blazing heat, unbroken, almost tropical, from June to September, but with sufficient rain at night to make the flowers and the crops abundant. The farmers were afraid of their riches.

“ We will have a terrible winter to make up,” they predicted.

September, gayest, most jewelled month, had never been more splendid. The distant hills were lightly veiled in blue haze—the smoke of remote forest fires. Nearer hills were a flaming glory of colour against the deep cobalt sky ; maple, beech, and burning bushes of sumach blazing high. Mountain ash thick with orange berries, and the vermilion *pinbina* bordered the roads. The ditches were tangled with goldenrod and Michaelmas daisies and the gaudy magenta fireweed, Cranberries and pigeonberries, a feast for the birds and the chipmunks, carpeted the woods.

The frost struck suddenly and early. By November the hard sapphire brilliance of the sky

enclosed an earth already white with snow. It was going to be a long winter, that was certain, and it promised to be an unusually hard one.

Day after day the snow fell. It seemed as if the clouds could not let down enough snow on the hills and the villages. The little red and blue and yellow houses could scarcely lift their roofs out of it. Only the churches, with their tall spires, were safe not to be smothered.

It was a hard task to keep the high roads clear. The lonelier farms resigned themselves to complete isolation. The wind blew, the temperature dropped. The severity of the winter surpassed the most sage predictions.

(2)

Alma spent the summer and the autumn in the woods above St. Anaclet, making herself a home in an abandoned log hut that had once been used as a sugaring camp. She stored up old clothes and bracken and pine branches as provision against the cold, and managed to collect fuel and food enough for a time. Her restlessness with weakness and age, was greater than ever. Soon the cold drove her, shyer and wilder than before, down the hill into the village. She spoke to no one. One farmer after another found her asleep, in his stable, a mere bundle of black rags pressed against the warm flanks of a cow. There was genuine concern for the poor old creature, but she resisted all efforts to house her in comfort. Seeming to know that she was becoming an object of discussion, she hid herself during the day, cunningly determined

never to be found twice in the same place. She must be free to come and go as she liked. All her life long she had been free.

The church was safe and holy, above all warm, and in it she spent much of her time. The beadle said that she made the Stations of the Cross backwards, and that he had found her genuflecting to the holy water stoup, and this was thought very amusing indeed, in spite of the genuine pity expressed by some of the women. To the majority she was not a woman any longer, scarcely even a human being: an odd bit of wreckage drifting about, probably too old to feel any more; "touched in the head." They would never be like that, they comfortably reflected.

Convinced of the security of the church, she took to sleeping in it night after night. The beadle complained to the curé that it was no credit to the parish to find a disreputable old ragbag in one of the pews every morning. Something must be done. They should not ask her whether it pleased her or not—a *détraquée* such as she—she should be forcibly removed to the convent infirmary. She had a cough to break you in two, the beadle reported.

The curé, a kind man, was genuinely disturbed by the problem presented by Old Alma. In the church, after mass, he discussed it with the beadle. Alma, who was hidden in a confessional, heard them planning to take her prisoner—kindly, and in her own interest—next morning.

Her heart beat wildly. Despair seized her. Never, never would she live in a house with any

people except her own. She would find them—her own family; it was a long time since she had seen them.

Unobserved, she crept out of the church. In the blustering snowstorm that roared about the warm, compact little houses, no one saw her hobble through the village and make for the railway track.

The beadle's sense of pride in the parish was not outraged next morning: no tramp had sought refuge in the church. He and the curé looked for her in vain. The cunning old woman had hidden herself well!

By that time she was well on the way to Trois Pistoles, knowing enough, in spite of a confusion and distress of mind, to realise that her only chance of getting there was by walking along the railway track. The roads were impassable.

She rested in shanties by the way used by the railway men. One was quite warm; the men who occupied it, while they kept the tracks clear, were coming back soon and had left the stove alight. There was food in it too. She shook the snow off her clothes as well as she could, ate and slept. The icy hem that reached half way up her garments thawed and ran over her in water. She shivered and moaned in her sleep.

But for that rest she would never have reached Trois Pistoles. She had a long way to go yet, she told herself when she woke stiff and shivering in the dark cabin, but she would manage it of course, because the children would be expecting her. . . . A long way to go.

She recognised her own house at last. She

could not tell whether the kitchen fire was lighted or not, because all the blinds were drawn down . . . but naturally when she opened the door, she would see that it was burning brightly. It was sure to be, on such a cold snowy night, when all the family were at home.

The snow was deep and soft and heavy ; there was no path at all up to the house ; the front door was blocked by a huge drift. She stumbled and sank at every step, her breathing was hard and quick. It would be easy to lie down and rest for a moment, but she was so eager to see the children. The hill was really dreadfully steep. She must shovel a path from the front door to the barn, the first thing in the morning ; otherwise she would not be able to feed the chickens.

She fumbled for the key, but luckily she did not need it ; someone had left the kitchen door unlocked.

CHAPTER SEVENTEENTH

SHE opened the door softly, to give them a surprise. There they all were, the babel of their voices, all talking together, almost drowning the sound of the wind.

“ Here I am at last—Alma,” she said cheerfully. “ I have kept you waiting, but you see I was picking strawberries. Oh, you are all here, every one ! ”

She smiled her delight at them all ; Ephrem and Zélie, the three boys, P'tit Ange, miraculously young and fair, Lucie in a pinafore, playing with Désiré, the quiet little fellow, and making him laugh aloud.

How warm and pleasant it was in the lamp-light, with all the family there, and the fire burning brightly as she had expected. She stretched out her hands to its glow. . . She could see Alma too, bending over her work, with her red cheeks and her fine black hair. That was funny, because *she* was Alma ! She did not stop to puzzle it out. Instead she went over to the window, and saw that it was a summer day. They were all streaming down across the fields to dance in the barn at a wedding feast. Désiré was as excited as any of them, skipping along by Tançrède's side, begging to carry his fiddle. . . .

But there was something she must do first, before

she went to the wedding-breakfast. . . . What was it ? Oh, yes ! She must go to the barn and drag the coffin up to the house—the coffin that Ephrem had made—because he could not rest till it was in his room. . . . Here it was, and it was very heavy. . . .

She pulled it into the room somehow. . . . They had all returned from the wedding by now. . . . They stood and laughed at her. Their voices and their laughter rose and rose, drowning the wind.

The warmth and the light made her a little sleepy. Perhaps, as her bed happened to be beside her, just for a moment she would rest. How soft and white it was, she thought happily. She was tired after her long day's work, up so early as she was, too. . . .

She crept into the coffin from which daring boys had long ago wrenched the cover. It stood, its carved crucifix dusted with snow, propped against the wall at her head. Ephrem's coffin, the solitary object remaining of all she had once possessed.

The wind, racing round the tumble-down house, shook it crazily ; lifted the powdery snow in whirling spirals that, through the gap where half the roof had been torn off, drifted lightly upon Alma's bed. She saw the stars, sharp as spears in the remote dark sky, and she was content. She knew that no one had shut her in a prison. In the morning there would be the children——.

